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BE A MAN IF YOU CAN:
Examining Pre-Migration and Post-Watts Revolt Identities of Black Working-Class Men
in the Films of Charles Burnett, 1969-1990.

by

Donte McFadden

A Dissertation Submitted in
Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy
in English

at

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

August 2013

ABSTRACT

Be a Man If You Can: Examining Traditional and Contemporary Identities of Black Working-Class Men in the Films of Charles Burnett, 1969-1990.

by

Donte McFadden

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2013
Under the Supervision of Vicki Callahan, PhD

The films of Charles Burnett from 1969 through 1990 focus on the presentation of black working-class men in South Los Angeles as the decline of industrial jobs alters the socioeconomic landscape. Two periods that are important to understand the historical reference of Burnett's films are the Second Great Migration, in which African Americans evacuate the oppressive climate of Jim Crow to live in Los Angeles during World War II, and the Watts Revolt, a week in August in which residents of the Watts region revolted against law enforcement and business owners in response to the treatment of two African American motorists by California Highway Patrolmen. Burnett's films contain influences from Third Cinema and Modernist European Cinema, as shown in the use of handheld cameras on location shoots with non-professional actors. Burnett's earlier films rely on an episodic narrative structure to follow how his black male protagonists either transform their lives to adjust to the now-limited work opportunities, or stagnate themselves because the new climate has made them apathetic towards any hope for progress. His later films incorporate spatial narration, a storytelling strategy that relies on the formula of the classical Hollywood narrative. Rather than use this narrative structure

commonly found in mainstream American cinema to establish a conflict, climax, and resolution within the story, Burnett is more focused on the relationship between space and time, demonstrated in the onscreen presence of older and younger characters and issues that pertain to both historical (i.e. migration era) and contemporary (i.e. post-Watts Revolt) identity. Ultimately, this project identifies components in Burnett's filmmaking style and storytelling approach that allow him to present the lives of black working-class men of South Los Angeles and how they are effective.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I want to thank my advisor, Vicki Callahan, for recognizing my potential to make a strong contribution to the field of film studies. She has challenged me repeatedly to unveil a strong knowledge base and set of skills that I was often slow to recognize and share through my scholarship. I have always appreciated her knowledge of my research topics, plus her encouragement to present a history and basis of analysis on a subject that has very few predecessors. I thank Gregory Jay for acknowledging my interests in the field of African American Studies and sharing his appreciation of what I have shared about Cinemas of the African Diaspora and correspondence with Black Popular Culture. Thanks to Sandra Jones, a fellow McNair scholar whose work, passion, and encouragement reinforced that it was possible to complete this project and pursue an academic career. I thank Shelleen Greene for offering very helpful strategies for research and writing, plus her wisdom on effective transitions into a career as an academic. Thanks to Robert Smith for his enthusiasm to learn more about the project, and offering his perspectives on ways to tie my research to other topics outside of film.

A tremendous thanks to Portia Cobb, one of the few faculty members in my undergraduate years who inspired me to look beyond the scope of what I thought was a vast knowledge of cinema. My exposure to the Cinemas of the African Diaspora through her work as a Professor and Director of the Community Media Project inspired me to learn more about various approaches to film, filmmakers such as Charles Burnett and his colleagues at UCLA, and the urgency to write about and conduct research on black independent filmmakers. The Ronald E. McNair Post-baccalaureate Achievement

Program at UW-Milwaukee exposed me to the possibility of pursuing a doctoral degree in a topic I was passionate about, and I have no idea where I would be today without it. It has shaped me as a scholar, a professional, and as a human being, and I thank Douglas Harder, Nichlos Ewoldt, and Desere Liddell for their support all these years. I thank my mother, Janice McFadden-Laske, and my brother, Cedric, for all of their support throughout my years in postsecondary education. They may have not always understood what I was doing or why I was doing it, but I hope they are elated that I completed what I set out to do.

I dedicate this project to the memory of Lillie Williamson, Jessie J. McFadden, Flora Seefeldt, and Tomás Garrett-Rosas, Ph.D. Thank you for what you have done to lead me towards this journey.

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**Introduction:
The Early Cinema of Charles Burnett—
Portraits of Traditional and Contemporary Working-Class Masculine Identities
in South Los Angeles**

This dissertation focuses on Charles Burnett's films from the latter half of the twentieth century (1969-1990) to examine how he captures multiple portraits of black men from working-class neighborhoods in South Los Angeles. The legacy of the Great Migration in South Los Angeles and the outcome of the Watts Revolt of 1965 are two key historical components. Each of these moments is important to understand the basis of how masculine identities are presented and constructed in relation to black male residents in the region. Burnett's male characters embody conflict within themselves and among each other. His films offer an intimate insight into the lives of black working-class men onscreen in terms of where they live, what they do, and how they interact with their families and the surrounding community. These three dynamics are the basis of how characters construct and present particular notions of masculinity that responds to a moment in which they live.

This study places the traditional and contemporary presentations of black working-class masculinity alongside more familiar models of black men prevalent in Los Angeles from World War II through the 1990s. I magnify specific characteristics in this timeframe shared between older residents who migrated from the South and younger residents either born in Los Angeles or moved to the city with their family at an early age. Younger residents struggle to determine the relevance of their elders' past in the South to their lives. It is a dilemma that lies at the heart of the conflict they find themselves in with older residents. Burnett's objective is to acknowledge the importance

of the advice and practices of their elders to the younger male characters, along with the historical situations that make it difficult for the younger generation to accept that advice and those practices. Burnett argues that such adherence makes these men accountable to the well-being of their family and community members. Male characters who abandon their southern roots embody a sense of false empowerment in which they eschew responsibility for themselves and disregard other people's commitments and concerns.

Class distinctions are a peripheral yet important dynamic in the construction and presentation of masculine identities in response to historical situations. These distinctions are informed by the way various male characters see themselves as men based upon the jobs they have (if any), the income they generate, and the informational and economic resources to which they have access. A further discussion of each film in the later chapters will identify the recognition of class distinctions and how they contribute to masculine identities that either conflict with or complement one another.

This study is most concerned about black working-class masculinity as a series of multiple presentations. I describe black working-class masculinity migration-era and post-migration era throughout the chapter. Migration-era is modeled after the men who migrated to Los Angeles during World War II. Post-migration era references the young men who came of age after the Watts Revolt. The male characters in a majority of these films each present a masculine identity determined by their physical stature, the way they earn a living, and the way they communicate their ideas and emotions. Burnett disrupts the presentation of these identities to point that there is more to these images than what is at face value. A migration-era masculine identity derived from the Great Migration of African Americans from the South to Los Angeles and from the Watts Revolt of 1965

serves as the basis for which Burnett's male characters respond to the broken promises of the region's recovery plan and whether the memories of the rural South their ancestors possess remains relevant. The jobs, housing, and material wealth available throughout the second Great Migration shaped a generation of black men.¹ The arrival of migrants in overcrowded housing on Central Avenue while working at the bottom of the seniority chart in defense plants and shipyards marked their initial experience in South Los Angeles.² Continuing availability of employment during the 1950s and early '60s provided an opportunity to develop material wealth through the purchase of homes and automobiles. The transitional period during which black men could depend upon a reliable base for a living-wage income would span throughout two decades.

The Watts Revolt of 1965 resulted from a wide array of distressing attitudes a younger generation of black men directed towards authoritative figures in South Los Angeles. These would range from the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) officers who were criticized for their excessive handling of black men from South Los Angeles to the storeowners who sold tainted merchandise while providing substandard service to neighborhood customers. The outcome of the revolt would shape a generation of black men to grow more suspect of authority in municipal positions and property ownership. Their outrage was symptomatic in their attitudes towards the patriarchal figures in their own families. This disregard for authority would produce a masculine identity that

¹ The second Great Migration refers to the migration of black migrants from the South to the West during World War II. The first Great Migration refers to the migration of black migrants from the South to the Northeast and Midwest from roughly 1916 through 1919 (Painter 191).

² R.J. Smith explains that in addition to challenging housing options, employment options were minimal as well. He writes extensively about A. Philip Randolph's plan to organize a march in Washington, D.C. to demand an increase in jobs for African Americans, as captured in the *California Eagle* (Smith 48). President Roosevelt's signing of Executive Order 8802 to ban racial discrimination in defense industries and the establishment of the Fair Employment Practices Commission (FEPC) would motivate Randolph to call off further plans for the march (Smith 51).

thrived upon seeking self-sufficiency within and outside the boundaries of earning a legitimate income. Following the Watts Revolt, the closing of businesses, the relocation of plants and factories outside of the region that provided living-wage jobs, and increasing collective apathy would further reinforce these attitudes in spite of cultural, social, and political revival.

This project explores how Burnett's films utilize a set of cinematic techniques and a narrative structure to evaluate the way his characters produce masculine identities and how they are informed by multiple sources. The long take, the long shot, and the panning shot are three distinct techniques that are important in Burnett's examination of the construction of historical and contemporary masculine identities and how older and younger male characters respond to the physical landscape of South Los Angeles. The long take captures an image uninterrupted for a long period of time, a strategy to follow a character's decision-making process or tasks that he must perform. The long shot incorporates a wide lens to capture the actions of a character or characters as if they are dominated by the surrounding physical landscape. A panning shot is the horizontal movement of the camera to follow a character's actions. Later chapters focus on the way the panning shot captures the decaying physical landscape of South Los Angeles after the Watts Revolt.

The film's narrative structure is also vital to determine the distinctions between the constructions of historical and contemporary identities. Burnett's early films (*Several Friends*, *The Horse*, *Killer of Sheep*) rely on an elusive narrative structure in which a series of episodes follow one another without a clear transitional point. His later fictional films (*My Brother's Wedding*, *To Sleep with Anger*) align more closely with the classical

Hollywood narrative structure. The latter uses a storytelling structure that follows a set of editing rules to preserve continuity. It is a structure found in many offerings of mainstream American cinema and other films that emulate this practice. The basis of the classical Hollywood narrative is the 180° rule, in which a conversation between two people or two characters is captured in a shot/reverse-shot structure. Each character or set of characters must be placed at an 180° degree angle from the camera to maintain a line of continuity that gives the appearance of an actual conversation.³ Later chapters focus on how Burnett uses each form of cinematic storytelling to embed folkloric traditions from southern African American culture to emphasize divisions between characters along the lines of class and a clash of values between older and younger characters.

**Models of Masculinity in Migration Narratives and Sources for Cultural Memory:
Oscar Micheaux's *Within Our Gates* and Chester Himes's *If He Hollers Let Him Go***

This analysis of Burnett's films illuminates the second Great Migration and the Watts Revolt as two dynamics that directly affect the masculine identities of South Los Angeles residents. One dynamic involves the interactions between the divergent identities shaped by these different events. Migration-era male residents had economic resources available to them that enabled home ownership and the opportunity to build wealth prior to the Watts Revolt. These opportunities were not as abundant for post-

³ David Bordwell, Kristin Thompson, and Janet Staiger specify the objectives of continuity editing, namely the shot/reverse-shot: "Over-the-shoulder shot/reverse-shot cutting decenters a figure and puts his or her back to us, but the reverse shot reinstates that character front and center. Once the figures are arranged for us in the image, editing can introduce new angles, but then closer shots will typically be centered, balanced, and frontal in their turn" (52).

migration male residents. The history of migration in South Los Angeles traces as far back as the summer of 1941, when President Franklin Roosevelt signed Executive Order 8802 into law to ban racial discrimination hiring practices in defense plants. His policy decision encouraged African American residents in the Southeastern United States (especially Mississippi, Texas, and Louisiana) to escape the impulsive punitive implementation of Jim Crow laws and seek jobs at defense plants that were being built once the United States officially entered World War II.⁴ Burnett's family moved to Los Angeles in 1944, a time where African American residents new to the city at the time were concentrated in residences close to Central Avenue. They also struggled to adjust to new workplaces and the racial tensions they contained.

Chester Himes's novels are a model for how a creative medium explores the struggles of black workers who migrated from the South. Himes moved to Los Angeles from Ohio after serving a prison sentence and sought work in the shipyards. Himes's novels present standing up to racial animosity as a vital characteristic of one's masculine identity. His experiences at various jobs were a template for his literary treatment of psychological challenges black men living in Los Angeles faced in the workplace from racist colleagues, and at home from contentious spouses and relatives. *If He Hollers Let Him Go* (1944), Himes's first novel, focuses on Bob Jones, a black man who works at the Terminal Island shipyards with a predominantly white workforce. Bob's presentation of his masculine identity stems from his ability to withhold his justifiable anger from racist

⁴The Jim Crow laws were implemented throughout the South after the period of Reconstruction. This post-slavery period created a climate in which anyone identified as having a trace of "black" blood was disenfranchised from recognition and participation in the democracy. Lynch mobs were enabled to target and execute black men in the name of protecting white womanhood. The implementation of Jim Crow would enable the 1896 Plessy v. Ferguson decision that legalized segregation, by establishing the "separate but equal" principle (Painter 153).

taunts. The following passage magnifies the complicated interactions between race and gender in the workplace:

Now and then some of the white women gave me an opening to make a pass, but I'd never made one: at first because the colored workers seemed as intent on protecting the white women from the colored men as the white men were, probably because they wanted to prove to the white folks they could work with white women without trying to make them; and then, after I'd become a leaderman, because I, like a damn fool, felt a certain responsibility about setting an example. (Himes 18)

Bob diffuses the potential racial animosity at work by avoiding interactions with white women. He also learns to subdue volatile reactions to the racist condescension his white colleagues direct towards him. Bob also interacts with random residents outside of work to disclose his discomfort with Los Angeles. As he explains to a white patron he sits next to in a bar, "Just between you and me, Los Angeles is the most overrated, lousiest, countriest, phoniest city I've ever been in (Himes 42). This statement reveals Bob's clear dissatisfaction for superficiality and lack of sophistication in people. As a World War II-era migrant himself, Bob rejects the false promise of racial utopia for black residents in Los Angeles. His work experiences reveal how the maintenance of a rigid racial hierarchy that disadvantages black men contradicts the perception of Los Angeles as a site for an ideal racially integrated society.⁵

⁵ Smith offers his assessment of Himes's frustrated legacy: "[He] began his stay in Los Angeles with the loftiest literary ambitions, but by the time his stay was done and the dust had settled, he was a writer whose work would be found on dime-store paperback racks and in ghetto bus stations, when it was found at all. The trajectory makes him both one of the most influential writers of post-World War II America and one of the least understood" (*The Great Black Way* 100-101).

Himes's novel provides a creative precedent for Burnett's examination of the choices black working-class men make to retain their dignity. The narrative structure and alternation of cinematic techniques in each of Burnett's films present a multitude of black working-class men from the migrant generation who strive to stand as a model of stability. Younger residents assume a masculine identity informed by their attitudes towards past traditions from older residents and the economic resources available to them. Their identities also incorporate the dilemma of whether a woman is a mutual partner or an object to dominate, and a dismissive attitude towards initiative and self-accountability to resolve their own problems. These factors determine whether Burnett's male characters choose to transform themselves in a productive way as the disappearance of resources from South Los Angeles leads to a decline in the quality of life. His central protagonists reflect a generation to whom the options of living-wage employment and considerable job security are not available, as the majority of jobs shift from the manufacturing to the service sector. The older migrants escaped from the brutal enforcement of Jim Crow laws in the South to a hostile environment out West that nevertheless enabled them to earn a living wage, as their offspring were subjected to economic conditions that would give way to a vicious cycle of poverty. Like Himes in *If He Hollers Let Him Go*, Burnett explores in his films the frustrations and anxieties that plague these characters.

Himes's novels of the 1940s provide Burnett with a model to present black working-class men in South Los Angeles and the sources of the masculine identities they construct and project onto others. Work of black filmmakers dating back to the 1910s and 1920s also offers a precedent that explores ways in which black men identify

themselves and resist dehumanizing perceptions in the context of migration. These films establish the cultural memory that precedes the migration of African Americans from the South to Midwestern and Northeastern cities during World War I to escape the vicious legal suppression of the Jim Crow South. The conclusion of World War I would give way to hostile race relations, as race riots erupted in cities with significant black populations. The Red Summer of 1919 was marked by frequent lynchings performed by mobs of white residents seeking to terrorize black-populated regions.⁶

Oscar Micheaux, the most prolific filmmaker of this period, was also a novelist whose narratives presented his visions of class and color divisions, the reliability of the black church, and models of masculinity during the late 1910s and 1920s from his migrant experiences. Before he became a writer, Micheaux was a homesteader based in South Dakota.⁷ He moved to Chicago in the 1910s to pursue a career as a writer, and his novels centralized on the clashes between the city and the country in terms of physical landscape and values. One of his novels, *The Homesteader* (1917), focused on an African American couple focused on creating a new life in a rural part of the country.⁸ Micheaux would go door to door to sell his novels, and he would employ a similar strategy to contact major and independent studios to help fund his movies adapted from his previous works.

⁶ Chicago was one of many cities where race riots took place after World War I.

⁷ Pearl Bowser and Louise Spence point to the absence of any lineage from Micheaux that remains in South Dakota: “Many of the names on the map of homesteading parcels are the surnames of people who live in Gregory County today, many still on farms and ranches. But not Micheaux’s. None of his descendants are in the area” (221).

⁸ Micheaux would adapt his novel into a film starring Charles Brooks and Evelyn Preer, released in 1919 (Bowser and Spence 38).

One of his few films still in print, *Within Our Gates* (1920), focuses on a black schoolteacher at a school in the rural South to educate nearby children. She travels to the urban North to raise enough money to keep it open. The narrative contains many of the themes addressed earlier about class, interracial and intra-racial relations, and the role of the black church. The film's urban setting establishes the industrial landscape of the early twentieth century. Three key observations on *Within Our Gates* are important to note. First, Micheaux, a strong admirer of educator and Tuskegee Institute founder Booker T. Washington, foregrounds the message of race uplift.⁹ Micheaux modeled himself as a filmmaker in the self-help tradition that presented middle-class black men as models for social and moral upward mobility. When Sylvia Landry, the film's protagonist, moves to the South to teach, Micheaux shows a farmer with his sons expressing the importance of why they must receive a formal education. He sees schools as a more worthwhile institution for empowering African Americans than the church, as shown through his polarizing portrayals of each institution.¹⁰

⁹ Bowser and Spence describe how Micheaux embodied Washington's platform:

Micheaux now saw himself as a 'self-help' hero on two fronts: his success as a filmmaker and novelist established him as an exemplar businessman, and the success of this autobiographical films and novels refreshed and popularized his reputation as a pioneering African American homesteader. At the heart of this seemingly egocentric discourse was a call, implicit or explicit, for the transformation of the system of values that undermined self-confidence, opportunity, and the possibility of accomplishment. (37)

¹⁰ Washington's description of the schoolchildren in the South is similar to how Micheaux portrays them in *Within Our Gates*:

We learned that about eighty-five per cent of the coloured people in the Gulf states depended upon agriculture for their living. Since this was true, we wanted to be careful not to educate our students out of sympathy with agricultural life, so that they would be attracted from the country to the cities, and yield to the temptation of trying to live by their wits. We wanted to give them such an education as would fit a large proportion of them to be teachers, and at the same time cause them to return to the plantation districts and show the people there how to put new energy and new ideas into farming, as well as into the intellectual and moral and religious life of the people. (127)

Sylvia travels between the rural South and urban North to raise money. While this is not a direct reference to migration, the correspondence between two different geographical places points to the activity of migration during the 1910s on a domestic and international scale. On a domestic scale, the *Chicago Defender* and the Pullman Sleeping Car Porters were essential to circulating information about life in the North.¹¹ The newspaper noted abundant job opportunities and the possibility to live a life that departed from the exploitive practice of sharecropping and the brutal enforcement of Jim Crow laws. The Pullman Sleeping Car Porters circulated the paper to black passengers from the South to help them realize another existence.¹² On an international scale, black men who served in World War I in Europe were able to see other populations throughout the world. While many black soldiers fought to cease being treated like second-class citizens, a few of them remained overseas after the war ended.

Third, *Within Our Gates* ties racially charged mob violence to the anxiety of miscegenation that produces a traumatic aspect of cultural memory. The narrative shifts to a flashback of Sylvia's life in the South near the film's conclusion. Micheaux's use of crosscutting reveals a simultaneous moment in which Armand Gridlestone, Sylvia's biological father, discovered her identity while her adopted family is lynched and burned. Sylvia's adopted father, Jasper Landry, is wanted for murdering Philip Gridlestone for

¹¹ The Pullman Porters are attributed with accelerating the Great Migration. African Americans escaped the Jim Crow laws of the South to take advantage of increasing industry and manufacturing jobs in Northwestern and Midwestern cities as early as 1910. They would circulate Black-owned newspapers to inform people about increasing job opportunities. The Pullman Porters were also the first union established with an exclusively black membership (The Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters), led by A. Philip Randolph.

¹² Smith adds, "Porters belonged to a powerful all-black union with a national profile and won important victories for black workers. They had fought for their very names: one of the porters' most significant victories was the right to ignore travelers who called them 'George' (George Pullman owned the railroad cars; the common practice suggested slaves taking the name of their masters)" (*The Great Black Way* 5).

which he is blamed, though innocent. Micheaux's crosscutting shows Armand Gridlestone, Philip's brother, attempting to rape Sylvia as the family was lynched and burned to avenge his death.¹³ When he recognizes a scar, it reminds him that Sylvia is the daughter he gave up for adoption. Sylvia's cousin, Alma, creates a situation where Sylvia's fiancé, Conrad, finds her with her birth father. There are two things Conrad potentially suspects of Sylvia that Micheaux does not make obvious. Either Conrad suspects Sylvia to be in a compromising position with an older man, or, this is a moment where he discovers her biracial identity. The engagement is broken eventually. A potential suitor who Sylvia meets in the North, Dr. Vivian, aspires to restore Sylvia's trust in spite of her tragedy at the film's conclusion and offers to be her lifelong love.

While its central agent of migration is a woman, *Within Our Gates* offers many presentations of black men onscreen. These include a variety of "race men," such as Conrad, the soldier to whom Sylvia is engaged; Reverend Wilson Jacobs, the headmaster of Piney Woods School where Sylvia teaches; and Dr. Vivian, the politically engaged physician who wins Sylvia's heart as the film concludes. In this regard, the term "race men" refers to men of the black professional and middle class who seek to "uplift the race" by serving as moral beacons of the black community. Micheaux also presents corrupt and inept black men that include Larry, a criminal who tries to blackmail Sylvia

¹³ J. Ronald Green notes that Micheaux's inclusion of lynching of *Within Our Gates* was in response to the Chicago Riots of 1919. His decision to include the lynching of the Landry family would lead to the censorship of the film in Chicago (145). Gerald Butters further explains,

Produced during the 'Red Summer' of 1919, *Within Our Gates* was a powerful indictment of immense racial tension that existed in the postwar era....Chicago, where the film premiered, had been wracked by a terrible race riot the previous summer. In addition, between April and October 1919, over twenty-five race riots had taken place in towns and cities across the United States, in both southern and northern locations. Many white urban dwellers resented the burgeoning black community. As Micheaux accurately reports in his opening title, racial violence was no longer unique to the South. (160)

into becoming romantic with him. Another corrupt character is Old Ned, a preacher who is suggested by a friend of the school's eventual donor, Elena Warwick, as someone to whom she can donate money. However, Old Ned's purpose is to persuade his congregation that pursuing equal rights as American citizens impeded their ascendance to heaven. Eph is another character whose ineptness is on full display as a servant who works for the landowner Philip Gridlestone. In his attempt to inspire a lynch mob to seek out Jasper Landry and his family for murdering his boss, Eph becomes a victim of their restlessness when he is lynched as a result of their impatience.

Jasper Landry, Sylvia's adoptive father, is the character in *Within Our Gates* who best resembles the masculine identity of the black southern migrants Burnett references. The characteristics of Landry's masculine identity consist of a commitment to provide for and protect his family and to work diligently for his earnings, regardless of how meager they are. A scene within a flashback sequence shows Landry asking the landowner he works for, Philip Gridlestone, to increase his pay based on calculations Sylvia made of what he should earn. Gridlestone reinforces that his position as a white landowner in the South grants him the power to dispense wages however he pleases. He even goes as far to strike Jasper across the face to remind him of the physical force his father imposed on enslaved laborers he once owned. The sequence of events follows in which a white sharecropper shoots and kills Philip Gridlestone. Eph claims that Landry is responsible. Eph's accusation leads to Landry and his family's subsequent death. Their lynching and burning by a vigilante mob of white people illustrates the kind of terror and social and legal subjugation faced by African Americans in the South. This stringent enforcement of white supremacy through Jim Crow laws was the reason black residents migrated to

the Midwest and Northeast during World War I and to the west during World War II to pursue employment in developing industries. Jasper's presence as a sharecropper, a father, and the victim of a horrendous murder illustrates the traumatic aspect of cultural memory for the older black residents in Los Angeles. Micheaux presents black men such as Dr. Vivian, Conrad, and Rev. Jacobs, whose roles as a doctor, a soldier, and a reverend and schoolmaster emerge from an African American middle-class. Each of them is an example of Micheaux's attempt to present black people as patriotic Americans and strong contributors to society. Micheaux identifies them as models of a black masculine identity consistent with the dominant black male figures such as W.E.B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington in the early twentieth century; yet Jasper Landry's story is rarely presented in more familiar narratives about African American life in this period.

Micheaux's films and Himes's novels are precedents for Burnett's pursuit of questions about the African American migration experience and how that experience informs characteristics of multiple masculine identities in South Los Angeles. Burnett is most concerned with what led to the increasing distance between the migrants who arrived in Los Angeles in the 1940s, and their children who either moved to Los Angeles at an early age, or were born there after World War II. The characteristics of masculine identities from different generations have a variety of sources from which they draw their ideas about what it is to be a man. Many of their ideas tie to the economic, social, and cultural shifts in Los Angeles since the mid-1960s.

Black Working-Class Men and the History of African American South Los Angeles: 1940-1992

The term “black working-class male” references black men who have held or desired jobs in the manufacturing industry in the defense plants, shipyards, and rubber and tire industry.¹⁴ The fluctuating economic and societal conditions that determine the pay and availability of living-wage employment make this a working definition at best. These factors can shift the term “working-class” from being synonymous with middle-class to a stand-in word for the working poor. Burnett’s films centralize the historical and contemporary basis to understand black working-class men who exist within the periphery of more familiar black men in the history of African American Los Angeles over the course of three decades. One way to begin this inquiry is to look at the dominant black male figures in Los Angeles, beginning in the 1940s. Figures such as United States Congressman Augustus Hawkins, *California Eagle* newspaper editor John Kinloch, and Civil Rights attorney Loren Miller are the most centrally recognized black men in the city during the 1940s and ‘50s. They are duly noted for their contributions to improve the lives of African Americans in South Los Angeles, especially the newly arrived migrants. Hawkins was the first African American to represent Los Angeles in the California state legislature and the U.S. Congress.¹⁵ In both positions, Hawkins pursued a platform that

¹⁴ Josh Sides identifies plants and factories such as Goodrich, Firestone, Ford, Swift and Company, Phelps-Dodge, U.S. Steel, and Wiley-Overland as having been located in South Los Angeles at one point. During the 1920s, Los Angeles would become the largest manufacturing center in the country. A heavy concentration of manufacturing companies occupied the eastern part of South Los Angeles, across Alameda Blvd. East of Alameda, there were White-populated working-class suburbs such as Huntington Park, South Gate, Bell-Gardens, Bell, Lynwood, and Maywood (Sides 23).

¹⁵ Hawkins came to prominence through his involvement in the EPIC (End Poverty in California) campaign led by writer and gubernatorial candidate Upton Sinclair in 1933. He was one of a handful of participants who was subsequently elected to the California State Legislature and the United States Congress (Gottlieb et al. 20-21).

included fighting for access to quality schools and living-wage employment in workplaces that conducted fair labor practices (Sides 157). The *California Eagle* newspaper served as a companion to Hawkins, as its progressive outlook focused on engaging black residents in Los Angeles with ongoing current events. As an editor for the *California Eagle*, Kinloch helped establish a progressive platform that sought to keep its audience engaged as citizens. He later fought in World War II, where he died in combat.¹⁶ Loren Miller was a Civil Rights attorney who worked closely with the NAACP Legal Defense Fund to pursue discrimination suits.¹⁷

Collectively, these men exemplify a commitment to social justice and civic involvement as a character to the masculine identities each of them present. Their efforts were of great importance to establish a ground work for black migrants to find employment and housing of sufficient means. These values mirror Burnett's, and the basis for the analysis of each chapter is to recognize how he alternates between cinematic techniques and the application of a specific narrative structure outline reasons for why some younger residents do not embody these qualities. Some of the cases presented by Burnett show a pursuit towards their personal objectives in a way that are self-serving and have no substantive outcome. These cases embody characteristics within a masculine identity that include the selfish pursuit of one's goals at the expense of other people's safety and comfort. The analysis of each chapter seeks to determine if

¹⁶ At the age of sixteen, Kinloch was brought on to the *California Eagle* staff by his aunt, Charlotta Bass. A migrant from South Carolina, Bass became editor and publisher after the death of her husband in 1934. She was as active in politics as she was covering it. Bass would run for a seat on the Los Angeles City Council in 1945 on the platform of postwar job security, affordable housing, expanded public health services, and the reduction of water and power bills (Sides 51).

¹⁷ Loren Miller was known for working closely with Thurgood Marshall- in cases that directly affected Los Angeles residents. The first chapter offers a more extensive description of the cases he fought and his role within them.

these impulses tie to the desperation of daily survival, or if they reflect a distance between older and younger residents in which the development of masculine identities differ greatly over time.

More familiar models of black masculinity in the 1960s emerged from activist organizations that sought to help Watts recover from economic ruin. While the characteristics of these masculine identities are similar, the expressions differ widely to the point of conflict and rigid competition. After the Watts Revolt of 1965, the US Organization and the Black Panther Party were two organizations that presented competing models of black masculinity and designed individual recovery plans through political activism and cultural engagement. Led by Dr. Maulana Karenga (born Ronald McKinley Everett), the US Organization consisted of grassroots activists who focused on adopting an ancestral African identity. The group was committed to cultural nationalism, in which the ancestral principles were internalized to strengthen one's contemporary identity.¹⁸ The Los Angeles chapter of the Black Panthers, led by Alprentice (Bunchy) Carter, was committed to pursuing revolutionary nationalism, defined as challenging oppressive capitalist practices to obtain justice for poverty-stricken residents (Joseph,

¹⁸ Karenga and the US organization were responsible for creating the Kwanzaa holiday on December 31, 1966. Kwanzaa would become one of many celebrations in which Karenga and the organization were engaged. As Keith Mayes explains,

Holiday, festival, and ritual promotion inside and outside of US went hand-in-hand with Black Power activism on the West Coast. Karenga was known to conduct meetings with various organizations in the Los Angeles Black Congress only to return to Hekalu (temple and US's headquarters) later in the day to officiate an *harusi*—a wedding ceremony, or an *akika*—the nationalization and naming ceremony for children. From the Hekalu it was on to a black denominational church to officiate a *maziko* (funeral) for a fallen comrade. But holiday promotion also meant organizing larger public ceremonies in South Los Angeles similar to the Watts Summer Festival, annual Malcolm X birthday and assassination commemorations, and Uhuru (freedom) Day rallies commemorating those who lost their lives in the Watts rebellion.” (234)

“Introduction” 3).¹⁹ These groups had an intense rivalry that would lead to deadly results that will be discussed in the first chapter. Each group’s ideas of how to construct and express a sense of self-identity and self-determination after the Watts Revolt are based on the way they seek to empower their communities. The men in Burnett’s films depart from these recognizable models, just as his characters differ from the black male figures prominent in Los Angeles in the 1940s. The characters are quite distant from an identity that affirms the principle of self-determination, and each of them is confronted with internal and external obstacles to conquer. The later chapters will explore how Burnett’s younger characters are different from the masculine identities produced by these models of activism and gravitate towards instant gratification.

Burnett’s University Years and the Cultivation of Filmmaking Techniques

Charles Burnett’s university years are an important focal point in tracing the development of his filmmaking style. His engagement with filmmaking in a university setting is a useful supplement to how university film programs have been discussed during the 1960s and ‘70s. As a student at the University of California at Los Angeles

¹⁹ The Los Angeles chapter of the Black Panther Party adopted the principles of the headquarters based in Oakland. Simon Wendt describes:

Although the BPP’s founders Huey Newton and Bobby Seale viewed themselves as the spiritual heirs of black nationalist Malcolm X, they were also deeply influenced by psychologist Frantz Fanon’s analysis of the Algerian freedom struggle. Incorporating Fanon’s ideas in their analysis of the problems that confronted urban black America, Newton and Seale likened the situation African Americans to that of a colonized people. From this perspective, white police officers constituted a foreign occupying army, which served as the military arm of a thoroughly racist system of oppression. The Panthers argued that armed self-defense against police brutality in black enclaves was a justified means to oppose this occupation. (158-159). The filmmakers of the Los Angeles School had no such outlets in which to transition. Haile Gerima speaks about this dilemma at great length in Zeinabu Irene Davis’s documentary *Spirits of Rebellion: Black Film at UCLA* (a work-in-progress).

(UCLA), Burnett took courses available through the Ethno-communications program.²⁰

The program, facilitated by Eliseo Taylor, was designed to recruit students of color to pursue degrees in film, television, and other forms of mass media offered through the Theater Arts department (Young 216).²¹ Burnett would work as a graduate teaching assistant for the Ethno-communications Program while pursuing his Master of Fine Arts degree. He would form relationships with students from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, notably with African and African American film students from the late 1960s through the mid-1970s. The loosely organized collective would become known as the Los Angeles School of Black Filmmakers, or the L.A. Rebellion (Taylor, “The L.A. Rebellion: A Turning Point in Black Cinema”). The filmmakers would raise questions about black identity through form, content, and the targeted audience for whom their films were made. Ntongela Masilela, a contemporary of Burnett and the filmmakers of the L.A. Rebellion, argues that the objective of each filmmaker was to craft a form of cinematic storytelling unique to their historical situation and the concurrent cultural

²⁰ David A. Cook describes how university-trained film students began to transition into Hollywood: Whereas the generation of directors who descended from classical Hollywood came largely from Broadway and the theater, and the recruits of the fifties and sixties were trained in television, many new directors of the seventies had studied *film as film* in university graduate programs and professional schools. They had taken film history, aesthetics, and production as formal academic subjects, and they had learned the technical aspects of production, as well as budgeting and marketing, more thoroughly than any generation before them (13).

²¹ David James observes how various demographics within the Ethno-Communications program at UCLA identified a specific filmmaking style to tell their stories. He explains that, after the beginning in the Ethno-Communications Program, cooperation or connection between the groups was limited, and at least until the mid-1980s their distinctive cultural heritages and different histories of relation to cinema and their present economic and social conditions caused each to develop distinct modes of filmmaking with quite different social, ideological, and aesthetic questions and quite different actual and projected relationships to the communities they represented. The Asian American group remained most strongly oriented toward documentary and community organization, while the African Americans directly aspired to reviving the tradition of independent features and to engaging with industrial production and distribution. Mexican American filmmaking oscillated between these alternatives, appearing in various forms on the peripheries of several overlapping modes of production and also engaging more extensively than the others with public policy initiatives and with television. (306)

production of visual artists, writers, and musicians (108). Masilela also identifies a relationship between Oscar Micheaux and his contemporaries when he adds, “The revolutionary breakthrough of the UCLA school was to draw in Micheaux’s work, yet shift its social subject matter from a middle class to a working class milieu in which Black labor struggled against White capital” (108).

The dichotomy that Masilela presents between black labor and white capital becomes relevant in Burnett’s case to the construction of a cultural memory that traces this struggle to the days of sharecropping. The first chapter discusses how two of his short films, *Several Friends* (1969) and *The Horse* (1973), each reference a period where there are very limited living-wage employment opportunities for black men. A point of concern is how Burnett applies an elusive narrative structure dependent on episodic arrangement to magnify how men present masculine identities in response to these conditions and the characteristics associated with them.²² A departure from a structure as formulaic as the classical Hollywood narrative allows for different dynamics to undergird the story, as Roland Barthes would argue that contextual elements that function outside of a narrative structure provide another layer that supplements the content (115). In Burnett’s case, the historical information contributes to the audience’s understanding of how migration-era and post-migration-era masculine identities are constructed. The emphasis on black working-class men for Burnett explains the way they are positioned in relation to others of the professional middle-class, to migrant elders who still possess

²² Roland Barthes’s analysis of narrative structures suggests a function of narration that ties to Burnett’s construction of an episodic narrative structure: “Narration can only receive its meaning from the world which makes use of it; beyond the narrational level begins the world, other systems (social, economic, ideological) whose terms are no longer simply narratives but elements of a different substance (historical facts, determinations, behaviours, etc.)” (“Structural Analysis of Narratives” 115).

recollections of the South, to the vanishing sites of living wage employment, and to the increasing scarcity of a stable economic infrastructure.

Burnett's ongoing conversations with his colleagues would help him construct a filmmaking style that examined the way black working-class men in Los Angeles constructed and presented multiple masculine identities. Burnett demonstrates authorial distance through the way the action unfolds onscreen. In the case of *Several Friends* and *The Horse*, the catalysts to which the characters in each film respond are determined by the landscape that surrounds them rather than specific individuals. The characters in *Several Friends* place obstacles in front of themselves because they cannot find an efficient way to complete routine tasks. The father on whom four men and his son wait for in *The Horse* is an obstacle because they cannot leave after he has arrived. The distance Burnett establishes between his direction and his subjects enables him to depict closely the conditions to which a black male laborer is subjected in an oppressive system.

Burnett's execution of authorial distance was inspired by Basil Wright, a documentary filmmaker and producer from the British Documentary movement of the 1930s. During this period, non-fiction filmmakers collaborated to make films with a journalistic objective while working for the General Post Office (GPO) Film Unit in Great Britain.²³ The observational approach allows for subjects to recall their own stories while the filmmaker abstained from actively directing what took place in front of the

²³ John Grierson was a central figure in organizing the General Post Office as a documentary filmmaking unit. As Paul Swann explains, "This group of filmmakers, who constituted the documentary movement, was linked loosely by their varying degrees of allegiance to Grierson. They were joined much more tightly by the fact that they all worked outside the commercial film industry. Their time with Grierson was in many respects an experience similar to going to film school, combining on-the-job training, minimal pay, and an apprenticeship system" (17).

camera. Burnett appropriates this approach to capture how his characters express their notions of masculinity that either conveys confidence or self-delusion.

Burnett adopted a practice from his close relationship with Wright at UCLA where he allowed the audience to interpret the character's actions and not aid them. He adopts the observational approach to capture the banal details of his characters' everyday lives. It was a commonality that Burnett and Wright shared, as explained by the filmmaker:

When I had arrived at UCLA, there were no feature films you could identify with. But Basil Wright was giving extremely good courses about documentary films, and the way he was discussing this kind of worked opened up a possible way of thinking about film. So, before I discovered Third World Cinema, Basil Wright's class started a lot for me. In the films he discussed every shot contained a human element and touch. The subjects in front of the camera were treated like people, not just props and objects and things to be manipulated. (Reynaud 328)

Burnett learned through Wright to grant his subjects space without any obsessive dictation so that their humanistic qualities emerge onscreen. This style of filmmaking allows Burnett to distinguish between historical and contemporary masculine identities because it allows for an unraveling of the characteristics that contribute to their constructions. Burnett's refusal to dictate the action in front of the screen means that he trusts the audience to determine what they think about a character's gestures rather than assign a premeditated conception.

The French filmmaker Jean Renoir was another direct influence on Burnett's cinematic style. Both filmmakers incorporate a use of deep focus that, as Andre Bazin

notes, provides its audience with multiple points of concentration in both the frame and the narrative. Burnett's use of the long shot in *Several Friends* and *The Horse* corresponds directly with Renoir's use of deep focus to capture the multiple layers of distress his characters faced as they were experiencing transformational points throughout the narrative.²⁴ Renoir's 1945 film *The Southerner* is Burnett's primary reference for the application of deep focus. The film portrays a Tennessee family fighting to sustain what little farmland they have after a natural disaster has struck the area. Renoir made his film independent of the major Hollywood studios during World War II, and his approach towards making the film countered the glamour and spectacle associated with the wartime movies that flooded the theaters. Burnett describes how Renoir's unique production situation allowed him to be more honest about race relations in American cinema than what would emerge from the major Hollywood studios:

[In Renoir's film] you see the black character, and the white character (Sam Tucker) that Zachary Scott plays—they were on equal footing. [...] They were sharecroppers, white and black, and sharecropping was hard for everyone. The rich landowners were the ones who benefited. Not the whites who were fighting for the same scraps from the master's table. Renoir showed it. (Kim "Charles Burnett")

Deep focus in Burnett's presentation of historical and contemporary masculine identities also contributes to the slow unraveling of details within the *mise-en-scène*. Burnett

²⁴ Andre Bazin argues that the application of the depth of field: is not just a stock in trade of the camera like the use of a series of filters or of such-and-such a style of lighting, it is a capital gain in the field of direction—a dialectical step forward in the history of film language. Nor is it just a formal step forward. Well used, shooting in depth is not just a more economical, a simpler, and at the same time a more subtle way of getting the most of a scene. In addition to affecting the structure of film language, it also affects the relationships of the minds of the spectators to the image, and in consequence it influences the interpretation of the spectacle. ("The Evolution of the Language of Cinema" 35)

demands a concentration on the subjects as well as the narrative strands that emerge. Bazin's work on deep focus magnifies Burnett's objectives that mirror Renoir's. In addition to emulating Renoir's use of deep focus and Wright's signature filmmaking style within the British Documentary Movement, Burnett's approach also shows close correspondence with Italian Neorealism. As with Third Cinema, British documentaries of the 1930s, and the American avant-garde documentaries of the 1950s and '60s, Italian Neorealism is characterized by the use of 16mm portable film technology to create film narratives that mirrored the lives of working-class Italians during World War II. The use of non-professional actors amplified a more realistic presence of the narrative's setting to communicate the economic disadvantage for poor and working-class Italians living in a war-torn country. Films such as *The Bicycle Thief* (Vittorio de Sica, 1945) and *Rome: Open City* (Roberto Rossellini, 1945) show the attempts from fascist and totalitarian parties seeking to control Italy. These moments of immediate history resemble how Burnett and his colleagues of the L.A. Rebellion presented the aftermath of the Watts Revolt in their films. The conventions of Italian Neorealism allow Burnett to situate his audience in the surroundings familiar to older and younger black working-class men. These conventions also grant an immediacy that aligns closely with location shooting that allows the audience to measure how characters respond to immediate situations.

The production situation in which Burnett executed these non-fiction techniques allows the audience to follow what takes place. Burnett admits that he was unfamiliar with Italian Neorealism until after he completed *Killer of Sheep*. While he not did directly engage with this period of filmmaking, he and his colleagues watched films with

similar conventions based on the use of 16mm film technology.²⁵ Peter Wollen observes the shifts that granted filmmakers more mobility to capture a variety of actions: “It was not until after World War II that new developments in sound technology were universalized, this permitting the immediate setbacks to overcome” (16). Wollen adds that magnetic recording tape “made sound recording much easier, and cheaper; it transformed dubbing and mixing and, with the subsequent development of the Nagra and crystal-synchronization, led to much easier location filming and the whole cinema vérité movement, with subsequent new definitions of ‘realism’ of film” (16-17). The use of a handheld sync sound 16mm camera equipment set was all that was available to Burnett. The portable technology enabled him to create a sense of immediacy to capture how these characters are responding to people and places in the immediate moment.

Burnett also shot films for his colleagues whose narratives contained a concentration on black working-class men who were either unemployed or incarcerated. Colleagues such as Haile Gerima, Larry Clark, and Billy Woodberry focused on the influence of one’s immediate living situation or imprisonment. A native of Ethiopia, Gerima studied theater in Chicago at the Goodman School of Drama. He pursued filmmaking at UCLA as a new outlet for telling stories. One of the feature films he made as a student, *Bush Mama* (1976), focuses on Dorothy, a widowed single mother who learns how to gain control of her own identity and understanding while monitored by state-sanctioned institutions (i.e. AFDC/social services, law enforcement) in terms of aid

²⁵ Bazin’s description of the conventions of Italian Neorealism is compatible to what is found in *Several Friends*, *The Horse*, and *Killer of Sheep*. As he explains:

The camera must be equally as ready to move as to remain still. Traveling and panning shots do not have the same god-like character that the Hollywood camera crane has bestowed on them. Everything is shot from eye-level or a concrete point of view, such as a roof top or a window [...] The Italian camera retains something of the human quality of the Bell and Howell newsreel camera, a projection of hand and eye, almost a living part of the operator, instantly in tune with his awareness. (“An Aesthetic of Reality” 33)

and constant monitoring. Her boyfriend, T.C., is incarcerated for a crime he did not commit. While in prison, he becomes exposed to books of the black liberation movement that transform his idea of black masculinity. The content of the texts T.C. studies help him develop a stronger consciousness of history that pertains to African Americans dating back to slavery. He comes to understand ultimately the systematic subjugation of black people to police surveillance and imprisonment. The information T.C. receives from the books he reads contrast with his expectations as a soldier fighting in Vietnam.²⁶ While T.C. becomes more informed about these systematic practices, Dorothy feels inundated with concepts she knows nothing about. Gerima's focus on T.C. throughout the film recalls the narratives of imprisoned black men authored by Eldridge Cleaver, George Jackson, and Malcolm X.²⁷ Their stories point to how the state of incarceration produces introspection as a characteristic of masculine identity and the information each of these authors absorbs to develop their transformation.

Larry Clark wanted to fuse film with other artistic expressions, namely jazz. His thesis film, *Passing Through* (1977), centers on Warmack, a jazz saxophonist who

²⁶ bell hooks offers an intriguing connection between black militant identity and military combat: Retrospectively, it is obvious that during the militant civil rights movement the white-supremacist patriarchal states recognized that it would be a simple matter to encourage black male fascination with violence. Although most folks remember the Moynihan report suggesting black males were being symbolically castrated by black females, they often do not know that his suggestion for how black men could restore their manhood was to send them to fight wars. White males acted as though black male patriarchal behavior was acceptable because black male bodies were needed to fight wars: both imperialist wars abroad and gender war on the home front. (*We Real Cool* 51) Interestingly enough, T.C. is imprisoned after serving two tours of duty in Vietnam. T.C. embodies a more didactic tone that shifts gradually from emphasizing the importance of the black man protecting the black woman to telling "his" black woman what she needs to hear. Dorothy's closing dialogue in the form of a letter demands that T.C. talk to her instead of at her. One way Dorothy suggests for him to do so is to focus on the basic survival needs her and others living in South Los Angeles face on a daily basis.

²⁷ Cleaver (*Soul on Ice*) and Jackson (*Soledad Brother*) were collections of writings that reflected each author's socio-political philosophy while incarcerated. While *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* was written long after the author was released from prison, a significant part is spent discussing his conversion to Islam while incarcerated.

searches for his mentor after being released from prison (Masilela 116). He reacquaints with his fellow musicians to share with them the idea of starting a record company. Returning to Masilela's point about the struggle between black labor and white capital, we can see how Clark uses the contemporary jazz scene in South Los Angeles as the site where these battles are waged between musicians and record label owners. Self-determination and control over one's creativity and identity are characteristics at the core of the masculine identities Warmack and his fellow musicians construct and present.

Billy Woodberry's filmmaking was most engaged in the relationship between the artistic practices and the political motivations of film movements throughout Africa and Latin America in the 1950s, '60s, and '70s (Masilela 113). The film conventions that emerged from these sources trace to Italian Neorealist films from World War II. In his film, *Bless Their Little Hearts* (1984), Woodberry uses handheld cinematography, location shooting, and black-and-white reversal film stock to examine how unemployment contributes distress to domestic life. The film's central character, Charlie, fails to secure permanent employment. The only consistent work he can find is as a day laborer, which disrupts how he sees his role at home as a father and as a husband. The film points to how the sharp decline of living-wage employment in South Los Angeles contributes to how Charlie's masculine identity contains self-doubt that leads to dishonesty when he begins an affair with another woman in the neighborhood.

These three films present a contemporary masculine identity of black working-class men in South Los Angeles along with a process of how these identities are constructed and the catalysts that inform characters' actions and decisions. Burnett explores the themes of transformation, self-autonomy, and self-determination with his

contemporary black male characters. Burnett's feature-length films are the point at which he becomes concerned about how internal and external obstacles interfere with the potential transformation of a black male protagonist. These obstacles include how characters engage with their family's immediate past. The male characters either reject the values and practices cultivated by their elders in the rural South, or they feel that the diminishing resources for living-wage employment overwhelm them with expectations set by their families. The films also include antagonists who express doubts about the central characters' abilities to be self-accountable and make reasonable decisions. The objectives of the narratives demand each central male character to attain control over his life and overcome his own emotional vulnerability. Each of these films contain a discussion of how each character responds to others that challenge the presentation of their masculine identity and the historical circumstances that directly affect the resources available to them.

Burnett may have functionally served as the cinematographer in his colleagues' productions, but he also helped develop a style and approach towards centralizing working-class black people that was unavailable previously in commercial American cinema. The centralization of the black working-class helped strengthen the collective's desire to define what a black film was. The work of Tommy Lott helps discuss the efforts to define a black film that moves beyond the biological identity of the filmmakers involved in the production process (84). Other dynamics include the attempt to make black characters more than just marketable commodities in a commercialized film industry. Lott proposes the use of conventions found in Third Cinema, and Italian Neorealism situates the audience in the lives of Burnett's black male characters (92).

This process also involves using the elements of cinema to strengthen the lineage between other artistic practices among black visual artists, musicians, dramatists, and literary artists. The correspondence between the media determines how aspects of these crafts can be transferred to a cinematic medium to illuminate more obscure aspects of African American identity.

Burnett and his UCLA colleagues were film artists developing their craft and consciousness about black political and cultural resistance during a transformative moment for American society. The desire and ability to challenge institutional authority was a basis for how black men involved in these initiatives expressed their masculine identity. At this point, younger black urban residents in densely populated neighborhoods were becoming less receptive to the strategies associated with church leaders and college student activists of the Civil Rights movement. Younger African Americans found the platform of the Black Power movement a more desirable activist philosophy that focused less on cultural and physical integration into dominant white society. The emphasis was more on strengthening urban black populations as strong economic, political, and cultural bases that would focus on self-determination and social empowerment. These components were essential to form a contemporary masculine identity because the younger activists were compelled to distinguish themselves in a way that foregrounded self-interests and necessary physical retaliation. Burnett's younger male characters depart from these models of masculine identity among younger men because they are more directly affected by the diminished recovery efforts following the Watts Revolt, which offered no hope.

Activist Kwame Ture (the former Stokely Carmichael) and scholar Charles V. Hamilton, the authors of *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America*, were part of a political shift in response to discriminatory practices towards African Americans in the United States. Artists and practitioners of the Black Arts Movement (which included poets and critics Amiri Baraka and Larry Neal) would produce literature, theater, visual work, and music to express similar sentiments to promote self-empowerment. After the assassination of Malcolm X in February of 1965, proponents of the Black Power movement wanted to continue the legacy and the direct interaction he had with people in the streets. Through his work with the Nation of Islam and later with the Organization for Afro-American Unity (OAAU), he established a precedent for Black Power activists to create a base.²⁸ The activism Malcolm X wanted to pursue was consistent with the colonial struggles and gains of independence in countries throughout Africa and Latin America as early as the mid-1950s. Men who followed the Black Power movement wanted to establish self-autonomy as a characteristic of their masculine identity by demonstrating a refusal to subordinate themselves in social, political, economic, or intellectual capacities.

These narratives of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements create a space for ordinary people doing extraordinary things to obtain social justice alongside luminaries such as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Fred Shuttlesworth of the Southern

²⁸ Malcolm X posits his thoughts on Black Nationalism after his return from his pilgrimage to Mecca when he asks the question:

Why Black Nationalism? Well, in the competitive American society, how can there ever be any white-black solidarity before there is first some black solidarity? If you will remember, in my childhood I had been exposed to the Black Nationalist teachings of Marcus Garvey—which, in fact, I had been told had led to my father's murder. Even when I was a follower of Elijah Muhammad, I had been strongly aware of how the Black Nationalist political, economic, and social philosophies had the ability to instill within black men the racial dignity, the incentive, and the confidence that the black race needs today to get off its knees, and to get on its feet, and get rid of its scars, and to take a stand for itself. (431)

Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), and Carmichael and Ella Baker of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Yet the focus on daily survival was very real for many black residents living in urban and rural areas. Their living situations directly affected whether or not they wanted to participate in civil disobedience. The challenges black urban residents faced in becoming agents of social change is one of the lessons learned by filmmakers of the L.A. Rebellion in South Los Angeles. These filmmakers made and released their projects to a limited audience during the twilight of the Black Arts movement in the mid-1970s. Their tactics of surviving in increasingly resource-deprived urban areas was of as much importance as sharing the immediate legacy of the black liberation movement.

Burnett's body of work focuses on internal tensions within family structures and the larger black community, giving significant attention to class and the fluctuation of socioeconomic status. The emphasis on working-class protagonists as opposed to solely the professional middle-class, as argued by Masilela, is a major distinction between the filmmakers of the L.A. Rebellion and the black filmmakers of the early twentieth century. Micheaux, George and Noble Johnson of the Lincoln Motion Picture Company, William Foster (*The Railroad Porter*, 1910), and other early black filmmakers focused on how class tensions arose between urban and rural inhabitants, and how the presence of religion and skin color determined the power dynamics of international relationships about black people.²⁹ Gerima and his colleagues would argue that their predecessors internalized and projected these phenomena as their own internalized sense of superiority. Gerima asserts that the models of masculinity from black filmmakers in the early twentieth century

²⁹ William Foster is generally recognized as the first African American to make a motion picture. The title of *The Railroad Porter* references the Pullman Porters, a service position in sleeping cars that was often the only line of work available to African-American men (Yearwood 32).

reflect an internalization of the values and standards of dominant white society.

Subsequently, “they damaged the whole historical movement of a powerful and significant transformation of our people’s lives. Thus, in order for black filmmakers to rise in the future, there must be fundamental examination of these errors and a clarification of the pitfalls of independence” (Gerima 108-109). Gerima and his colleagues take away the lesson from his predecessors that the black filmmaker must be fully conscious of what he or she presents onscreen. Gerima’s ideal black filmmaker must also be conscious of what they consume and accept as reliable conventional wisdom, so as to not present a symptomatic set of values that may reinforce a similar kind of ideology.

Gerima has a similar focus on cultural memory as a central component of one’s masculine identity in a similar fashion as Burnett. He proclaims that the black filmmaker must “have a strong sense of history, because in that history the filmmaker finds his or her freedom. A sense of history provides a context and a meaning for one’s work; a struggle must play a central role in the course of this history” (109-111). Burnett’s engagement with history lies in three instances: a catalyst to which people respond; a central component of one’s masculine identity; and a basis for how residents who migrated from the South shaped their identity in response to available resources. The films that are analyzed throughout this project reflect Burnett’s sense of history that is most concerned with how historical moments, generational shifts, and the presence of cultural memory inform the definition, construction, and expression of one’s sense of masculinity.

Burnett also emphasizes the familial tensions that confront his black working-class male characters within the framework of black labor struggling against white capital. In his films, these tensions magnify the sources of their internal and external conflicts, many of which lie along the lines of what is valued and what is discarded. Burnett's focus on these internal struggles within the family and the larger black community are also informed by the emergence of new cultural and political models of black masculinity, as noted earlier. I have discussed these examples, not because they served as models emulated by Burnett's characters, but to situate both the examples and Burnett's work in a larger discussion about how historical and contemporary masculine identities are constructed by black working-class men in South Los Angeles that respond to the Second Great Migration and the outcome of the 1965 Watts Revolt.

A Methodology to Identify Cinematic Strategies to Present Masculine Identities

The methodology for this study relies on analytical models from scholars of African American Cinema and Third Cinema. These models help to examine how Burnett uses cinematic techniques to identify commonalities and differences between traditional and contemporary portrayals of black working-class male identity from World War II through the late 1980s. Burnett seeks to portray a consummate masculine identity in which the values and traditions of the past inform how younger men face present-day challenges. Burnett's use of the long take, the long shot, and the panning shot helps him draw attention to how the physical outcomes of the second Great Migration and the Watts Revolt directly affect his black male characters. He also pays close attention to how his protagonists interact with others in a particular space.

Teshome Gabriel's analysis of cinemas from Africa and Latin America throughout the 1950s, '60s, and '70s examines how the camera captures the characters' responses to antagonistic characters and their surrounding landscape. His analysis centers on the function of cinema as mass participation and the corresponding and conflicting relationship between space and time. This function derives from narrative traditions indigenous to Third World populations and storytelling practices from dominant Western populations.

The source of Gabriel's distinctions between various kinds of Third Cinema from this period stems from Frantz Fanon's study on the phases of revolutionary violence to combat colonialism.³⁰ The category that Gabriel identifies as the most evolved phase of Third Cinema is the combative phase. He describes this form of Third Cinema as filmmaking that functions as a "public service institution" that enables a "cinema of mass participation" that is ultimately "managed, operated, and run for and by the people" (Gabriel, "Towards a Critical Theory of Third World Films" 33). The combative phase is the third of three phases that Gabriel identifies in films of Third Cinema from the 1950s through the 1980s. The first phase, unqualified assimilation, refers to films that resemble the narrative structure and execution of movies from the Hollywood studio system. The remembrance phase is second; it consists of historical narratives set in the countries in which the films are made. These three phases directly derive from Frantz Fanon's analysis of writers from African countries that were seeking independence from their

³⁰ Fanon offers a similar breakdown of revolutionary action in his chapter "On National Culture" in *The Wretched of the Earth*. During the fighting phase (referenced in Gabriel's text as the combative phase), Fanon describes the transformation that the native resident must undergo to help obtain independence: "During this phase a great many men and women who up till then would have never thought of producing a literary work, now that they find themselves in exceptional circumstances—in prison, with the Maquis, or on the eve of their execution—feel the need to speak to their nation, to compose the sentence which expresses the heart of the people, and to become the mouthpiece of a new reality in action" (223).

European colonizers. Fanon observes how each kind of writer identifies with either their fellow natives or their colonizers in each of these phases.

Fanon's emphasis on the revolutionary action colonized African nations enacted to obtain liberation serve as a parallel for Burnett, as he looks for cultural memory to perform a similar function as the component that transforms a contemporary sense of masculine identity. Each of Gabriel's three phases suggests a structural model for Burnett to follow how cultural memory can both magnify the stability of older migrants and strengthen an increasingly apathetic generation of younger residents. Time and space also tie to Gabriel's appropriation of Fanon because they describe a context in which cultural memory is centralized. Burnett's films embody a filmmaking style that captures his male characters' responses to their immediate physical surroundings and the social, cultural, and historical moment in which they live. Burnett's objectives with this filmmaking style are much like the content found in Gabriel's analysis. Gabriel distinguishes commercial Western cinema and Third Cinema through the relationship between time and space. The following passage explains the relationship between these two concepts:

Where Western films manipulate "time" more than space, Third World films seem to emphasize "space" over "time." Third World films grow from folk tradition where communication is a slow-paced phenomenon and time is not rushed but has its own pace. Western culture, on the other hand, is based on the value of "time"—time is art, time is money, time is most everything else. If time drags in a film, spectators grow bored and impatient, so that a method has to be

found to cheat natural time (Gabriel, “Towards a Critical Theory of Third World Films” 44).

Burnett’s emphasis on space instead of the temporal demands of the classical Hollywood narrative enables him to emphasize the presence of the second Great Migration and the outcome of the Watts Revolt. The physical space of South Los Angeles has become so dispersed and void of resources that it creates a prolonged sense of time that mirrors the lives of the residents. The slow emergence of optimism moves at a pace that produces impatience and culminates in apathy. The duration of the long take, the framing of characters and the landscape within the long shot, and the motion captured within the panning shot are used by Burnett to demonstrate the slow process of how these men obtain and stabilize a sense of cultural memory, if they do so at all. Post-migration Los Angeles is a site where the struggle between space and time in Burnett’s films lies in the way his characters are dominated by the surrounding landscape or the oppositional perspectives that directly affect the presentation of their masculine identity. Later chapters will discuss at greater length how Burnett prioritizes space over time to magnify the construction of historical and contemporary masculine identities among black working-class men.

The conventions that help illuminate Burnett’s management of space and time are the long shot, the long take and the panning shot. Burnett uses these techniques to trace the process his older and younger male characters undergo in their orientation with cultural memory. In his description of the long take in Third Cinema, Gabriel states that “the slow, leisurely pacing approximates the viewer’s sense of time and rhythm of life,” adding that “the preponderance of wide-angle shots of longer duration deal with a

viewer's sense of community and how people fit in nature" ("Towards a Critical Theory of Third World Films" 44). In addition, he asserts that the pan shot "maintains an integrity of space and time" that presents not a "strictly linear or chronological" timeline, but one that co-exists with a specific spatial arrangement (45). For Burnett, the long take and the panning shot illustrate ways his characters engage with antagonizing characters and the physical landscape diminished by the outcome of the Watts Revolt.

Manthia Diawara's analysis of cinematic narrative structure helps determine how Burnett's application of camera movement and temporal duration magnifies the importance to resuscitate cultural memory. Two models from Diawara that point to the efficacy of how his use of cinematic techniques to capture the benefits and consequences of how his black male characters employ cultural memory to undergo a transformation where they reconcile with their immediate ancestral past and respond to transformative conditions. He argues that black independent filmmakers, notably Burnett and his contemporaries, utilize film as a "research tool" that "investigates[s] the possibilities of representing alternative Black images on the screen; bringing to the foreground issues central to Black communities in America; criticizing sexism and homophobia in the Black community; and deploying Afrafemcentric discourse that empower Black women" ("Black American Cinema" 5). Similar to how Diawara describes the use of film as a research tool, Burnett's films bridge gaps between historical and contemporary masculinities and foreground why these identities clash at times. The specifics of how each historical moment corresponds with either the second Great Migration or the outcome of the Watts Revolt is determined by how the film's central male characters respond to their physical surroundings, the people with whom they interact, and the

choices they ultimately make. Burnett's approach to filmmaking allows him to present intricate insight into the process of how black working-class men envision and project themselves.

Diawara's insistence of African American independent filmmakers to use their craft as a research tool ties to a narrative structure he defines as "spatial narration." He describes it as a strategy to arrange characters either within the *mise-en-scène* or a particular narrative structure to magnify the dichotomy between the powerful and the powerless ("Black American Cinema" 11). Masilela's discussion of black labor struggling against white capital is a useful basis for a narrative structure within a spatial narration. Burnett uses the dichotomy of black labor and white capital in his short films and documentaries to articulate the struggles between the identities of black working-class men and the historical circumstances under which these men must survive. These dynamics help determine their contribution to the construction of traditional and contemporary masculine identities.

Diawara adds that by functioning as a research tool, film becomes "a way of revealing and linking Black spaces that have been separated and suppressed by White times, and as a means of validating Black culture...a way for Black filmmakers to reconstruct Black history, and to posit specific ways of being Black Americans in the United States" ("Black American Cinema" 13). The term "black space" is synonymous with the historical and contemporary masculinities Burnett presents in each of his films. The validation of black culture is the reason the preservation of cultural memory and the subsequent transformation of younger black male residents are both very important.

Diawara's definition of spatial narration also helps centralize the importance of cultural memory among young black male characters and their situations in a way that is not recognized in commercial American cinema. He argues:

the narrative pattern of Blacks playing by hegemonic rules and losing also denies the pleasure afforded by spectatorial identification. In terms of the Oedipal analogy in the structure of such narrative patterns, the Black male subject always appears to lose in the competition for the symbolic position of the father or authority figure. And at the level of spectatorship, the Black spectator, regardless of gender or sexuality, fails to enjoy the pleasures which are at least available to the White male heterosexual spectator positioned as the subject of the films' discourse. ("Black Spectatorship" 216)

Burnett uses spatial narration to bridge these spaces to identify a direct and subconscious correspondence between older and younger black men. The pleasure lies in the recognition that younger black male Angelenos do not feel the need to discard their immediate ancestral identity. The urgency to alleviate these tensions also forces Burnett to position older and younger residents in competition for the symbolic father figure. The struggle to become a paternal or authority figure in each of Burnett's films becomes a battle between the values and traditions of black migrants from the South and younger residents of South Los Angeles who survive in the fringes of the declining regional economy. In his films, Burnett asserts that the disappearance of rural work practices and spiritual traditions increase the danger of cultural memory being discarded.

Lott's analysis complements the questions raised about how spatial narration bridges these spaces to preserve cultural memory and institutes a consummate identity

that merges the past with the present. His no-theory theory challenges previous practices of African American cinema that focus on the identity of the filmmakers and actors. He demands a more substantive criterion that considers the way a film is made to magnify the culture, history, and contemporary concerns of African Americans not available through mainstream American cinema. To fit these components, Lott is most interested in a set of cinematic aesthetics that “challenge, disrupt, and redirect the pervasive influence of the master narrative” (93). Burnett uses the process in which working-class men embrace or reject the immediate ancestral past of the rural South that informs their cultural memory. In addition, these “black filmmaking practices must continue to be fundamentally concerned with the issues that presently define the political struggle of black people” (Lott 93). Burnett merges the cultural with the political to magnify the commonalities between the two generations of black-working class men. Much like how Diawara discusses the relationship between black spaces and white times in the classical Hollywood narrative, Lott advocates for cinematic techniques and a narrative structure that prioritize black male subjects. This prioritization provides a context that explores the internal and external struggles Burnett’s central characters face and the necessary cinematic techniques for this process.

In each of Burnett’s films, location shooting allows for a fictional narrative to magnify the lives of the people who actually live in that region, much like how a documentary does. One dynamic that emerges is the inclusion of what Bill Nichols calls “social actors,” the characters and real-life people who portray themselves based upon the setting that is established. Nichols observes that documentaries “[speak] about situations and events involving real people (social actors) who present themselves in stories that

convey a plausible proposal about, or perspective on, the lives, situations, and events portrayed” (14). This process allows for the audience to see the immediate physical outcomes of the second Great Migration and the Watts Revolt as places where Burnett’s narratives are set. His use of authorial distance persists by opting not to interrupt and dictate the action. Burnett follows his characters as if he were capturing live action as opposed to interpretive reality. Nichols’s subsequent remarks further explain the limitations of continuity editing in a conventional narrative structure. His statement below further reveals the importance of Burnett simultaneously using fictional and documentary conventions to tie the disparate spaces of his black subjects:

What is achieved by continuity editing in fiction is achieved by history in documentary film: things share relationships in time and space not because of editing but because of actual, historical linkages. Editing in documentary demonstrates these linkages....Documentary is therefore much less reliant on continuity editing to establish the credibility of the world it refers to than fiction.

(Nichols 23)

Nichols’s point about the function of continuity in documentary film editing mirrors Burnett’s attempt to bridge historical and contemporary masculine identities. The way Burnett shoots his characters in each film does not rely on a breakdown of coverage through the application of shot/reverse-shot, but the handheld camera concentrates more on how the characters’ ideas about masculinity unravel onscreen. Long shots are also embedded within long takes to capture the process of a character’s engagement within a cultural memory more closely. The convergence of these techniques collectively functions to create what Diawara calls a “cinema of the real.” He describes it as “a mixed

form of fiction and documentary in which the documentary element serves to deconstruct the illusion created by the fiction and makes the spectator question the representation of ‘reality’ through different modes” (“Black Spectatorship” 219). Diawara’s definition is a solid base for Burnett to amplify aspects of black cultural identity that can “deconstruct the illusion” possessed by his younger male characters who think the immediate past of their elders is not important.

Burnett combines techniques from documentary and fiction cinema to trace how his male characters respond to physical surroundings and historical moments and what this reveals about their engagement with cultural memory. Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino offer an assessment of the documentary in which they describe it as “perhaps the main basis of revolutionary filmmaking,” adding, “Every image that documents, bears witness to, refutes on, and deepens the truth of a situation is something more than a film image of purely artistic fact; it becomes something which the System finds indigestible” (46). Solanas and Getino endorse the approach to filmmaking consistent with Diawara’s concept of a “cinema of the real.” This form of cinema contains conventions that are tied exclusively to either fiction or documentary films. He further describes this as a type of filmmaking where “there is no manipulation of the look to bring the spectator to a passive state of uncritical identification. The films show a world which does not position the spectator for cathartic purposes, but one which constructs a critical position for him or her in relation to the ‘real’ and its representation” (“Black Spectatorship” 219). Burnett’s films establish a relationship between the audience and the images onscreen to identify if the characters’ process to engage with and embrace cultural memory mirrors their own. The aspects recognized by the

protagonists directly relate to their assessment of historical moments from the late '60s and the early '90s. These aspects also inform their responses to the Second Great Migration and the outcome of the Watts Revolt. Burnett places his characters in physical settings and narrative situations that resonate with the audience's orientation with their immediate ancestral past. Burnett seeks to identify in these varying presentations of black masculinity how they either complement or contradict with the narrative's central protagonist along the lines of class distinctions, a clash of values between older and younger residents, and responses to historical and contemporary phenomena that directly affect the region. Burnett allows the viewer to determine what bit of cultural memory has been retained after the migration out west and what has been abandoned.

Chapter Breakdown

Each chapter contains a discussion of the cinematic techniques Charles Burnett uses to capture the construction and presentation of traditional and contemporary black masculine identities that a wide variety of black male characters provide. A contemporary notion of masculinity responds to both its distance from the values from the migrants of the second Great Migration and the immediate catastrophe of the Watts Revolt, and the factors that contributed to the region's decline. Each of the films uses either a formulaic or loose narrative structure. The utilization of each storytelling approach will be explored to determine how spatial narration persists through two specific dynamics. One dynamic is Masilela's focus on the struggle between black labor and white capital, while another is Diawara's framing of the relationship between disparate black spaces to validate the less recognizable aspects of black culture such as

the presence of folklore within a conventional cinematic narrative structure. This narrative structure embeds a way to identify how a traditional and contemporary sense of masculinity found in Burnett's central characters manifests as an idea and a response to a person, a place, or an immediate moment. The timeframe from 1969 through 1990 in which Burnett's films are set, the historical references he makes, and the way in which the stories are told provide a context to trace the characteristics of these identities. These dynamics also consider the responses they prompt from other characters.

The first chapter focuses on two of Burnett's earliest short films: *Several Friends* (1969) and *The Horse* (1973). Each film incorporates a loose narrative structure that presents the way characters respond to the surrounding landscape. Both short films are discussed in this chapter to present a historical and contemporary notion of masculinity tied to the realities of scarce living-wage employment opportunities. The two situations Burnett references are sharecropping during the Reconstruction and Jim Crow era and the relocation of plants and factories to the outskirts of the city. The setting of each film and the tasks that each character must complete are responses to the cultural memory of black laborers that precede the migrations of the twentieth century (*The Horse*), and to the collective apathy produced by the broken promises of the recovery from Watts (*Several Friends*). Both films are discussed together to unveil a historical cycle of limited employment opportunities for black man that spans roughly a century. It also allows the audience to recognize the competency of the characters as they conduct certain tasks to determine if it is a reliable measure for self-accountability and responsibility.

In *Several Friends*, Burnett presents a shared contemporary black masculine identity between three men that contains characteristics of apathy, an indifference

towards following through on a task, and an impulse to distance themselves from an intensifying conflict. These men in turn focus more on what they are not doing than on what they should be doing. Given that the film was made four years after the Watts Revolt, their own notions of masculinity are worth reading in the context of South Los Angeles residents who lost confidence in anticipating increased opportunities. The film focuses on Andy, Gene, and Bracy, three neighborhood friends who attempt to either resolve situations or complete routine tasks. These tasks involve breaking up a fight in a liquor store parking lot, purchasing chicken for dinner at the neighborhood store, fixing a car, and moving a washing machine. The film raises two questions about how their level of competency correlates with their self-image. The question of competency is raised through Burnett's use of long takes and panning shots. The long take allows for a prolonged conversation between the men when they share scenes with each other or other characters to determine what needs to be done. The focus of these conversations alternates between what should be done and whether or not it is worth doing. Burnett situates the view to closely examine a character's level of motivation and initiative to determine how it is a response to a declining landscape, an increasing collective apathy, and an absence of cultural memory. The panning shot is used to follow whether a character's actions will move towards or away from completing the task. *Several Friends* also questions how these uninspired black men are able to create a self-image in which they are content with their inadequacy and have internalized the gruesome reality in which living-wage jobs have evaporated and an economic infrastructure has been destroyed.

In *The Horse*, a group of white men wait for a black man to arrive so that he can execute a dying horse. As they wait, the black man's son tends to the horse as if he is performing its last rites. The presence of the black man and his son clarify two issues. The film's rural setting references the era of slavery and sharecropping in the Jim Crow era. The presence of the boy and his father in a rural field presents a historical connotation in spite of the fact the film is set in the present day. In addition, the boy's preparation of the horse and the execution by the father show the development of a masculine identity within one life cycle. The process illustrates Burnett's objective to tie traditional and contemporary masculine identities together through something as banal as a horse's execution. The boy tends to the horse's wound, leads it to water, and takes it for a walk around the barn. The father takes such a long time to arrive at the farm that he does not show until nightfall. He makes the men wait for him for a long period of time to see him complete the task he has been assigned. Long takes are used frequently to capture the duration of time the men must wait and the attention the boy gives to the horse's wound. The long take and the panning shot illuminate the multiple ways Andy, Gene, and Bracy respond to the immediate realities following the Watts Revolt and the legacy of the Great Migration in Los Angeles. The discussion of competency as a masculine characteristic in *Several Friends* and *The Horse* points to the larger history of limited opportunities to earn a living wage persists for black men from post-Reconstruction through post-migration Los Angeles.

The second chapter discusses the internal struggle of a man's attempt to reconcile his relationship in *Killer of Sheep* in response to grueling working conditions and a haunting sense of cultural memory. The film's central character, Stan, presents a

contemporary masculine identity that illuminates his struggle to connect with his family and neighbors. He is also unable to follow through on plans he and friends develop to improve the socioeconomic situations of their families. The alarming level of subconscious distress from Stan's job and his problematic relationship with the past contribute to his struggles with insomnia and inability to attain a peace of mind. The film features music from a prior generation, and its presence reflects the harsh judgment Stan faced from his elders as a child. He initially dismisses the past as irrelevant to the new realities he faces in South Los Angeles, but he ultimately recognizes the level of resiliency he possesses to overcome his situation so that he can comfortably dispense the compassion his loved ones need from him.

Burnett uses techniques such as the long take in scenes where Stan is either working at the slaughterhouse, involved in an ongoing argument with neighbors, or handling a task to improve his socioeconomic standing. *Killer of Sheep* also uses the long shot to show large congregations of children in different settings. These shots include young boys playing in abandoned buildings near the railroad tracks, throwing rocks at each other, and contentious disputes between boys and girls that result in physical confrontation. The latter situation points to the dangers of youth learning bad habits of adults that include the potential neglect of cultural memory. The close-up magnifies Stan's range of emotions that depend on either his ability to remain resilient at his job, or his responses to possibilities to find a new motor to fix an abandoned car or make some extra money off bets at the race track. His newfound confidence is the central characteristic of his masculine identity in which he attributes his sense of resiliency to reconciliation with his immediate ancestral past. Stan's struggles also point

to Burnett's equal amount of concern of how young boys begin to construct their own identities through their interaction with the opposite gender, adults, and each other.

These moments reveal how male characters dispense aggressiveness in their attempts to dominate others, particularly the female characters. The film uses the long take, the long shot, and the panning shot to identify cyclical patterns between youth and adults. These patterns ultimately reveal a potential future that contains stagnant work opportunities and difficulty to meet basic survival needs.

The third chapter centralizes the clashing traditional and contemporary masculine identities in *My Brother's Wedding* (1983) and *To Sleep with Anger* (1990), and also incorporates class disparities and gender conflict. In *My Brother's Wedding*, the central character, Pierce, is dependent upon his parents for a job and a place to live, which lies at the center of how he expresses his masculine identity while not acknowledging his immediate ancestral past. Pierce refuses to take initiative and assume accountability for his actions, additional characteristics that prompt his relatives to not take him seriously. Pierce exhibits a sense of immaturity shown in his pursuit of petty arguments, his inability to assume responsibility for tasks his family asks him to do, and his inclination to wander the streets. He faces a major challenge when he has to help his friend, Soldier, transition back into society after he is released from prison. Pierce also faces conflicts from his parents, his brother, and his fiancée. These relationships unveil the widening gap between the working class and the rising black professional middle-class, where black men with a college degree are afforded occupations and a lifestyle increasingly unavailable to those without one. His immaturity is attributed to his refusal to accept his parents' values and traditions.

A peripheral concern from the clash of traditional and contemporary masculinities is the rising internal tensions between the professional middle-class and the burgeoning working poor. It is also concerned about the clashing ideas of masculinity between the agrarian-based work ethic of older residents and the urban-based sense of survival found among younger residents. Pierce's responses to his parents, brother, and future sister-in-law reflect his inability to handle transgression, and he ultimately amplifies conflict as opposed to resolving it. The film is set in a period where an underground economy driven by illegal drug and weapon sales replaced the legal economy of the plants and factories that had offered living-wage jobs before they were relocated. While this dynamic is not explicitly shown, it is conveyed through an increased sense of danger and demand for self-defense when young black men become an increasing threat.

Burnett merges the long take and the long shot throughout the film to depict moments Pierce and Soldier spend together after the latter has been released from prison. One series involves their re-acquaintance shortly after Soldier's release, while a later sequence shows Pierce and Soldier chasing a man who has tried to shoot and kill them. The long take and the long shot also capture how Pierce and Soldier respond to their geographic settings. Their movements within exterior spaces reveal the irony that they are free to do what they want, except for being confined to their neighborhood and the minimal living and working opportunities they have. Parallel editing is also used in moments where Pierce and Soldier's separate actions suggest an anticipated danger, or when Pierce is worrying his family with potential antics that may embarrass them. Insert shots are another technique used throughout the film to reveal how Pierce's family and

residents throughout South Los Angeles respond to potential danger and intrusion upon their property.

To Sleep with Anger raises questions about the way four central characters respond to the immediate past grounded in the rural South. The past is also a concern of Burnett's in the way it informs the construction and presentation of traditional and masculine identities. The older characters include Gideon, the family patriarch and a migrant from the South for whom hard work is a core value of his masculine identity, and Harry, a drifter who uses his gentlemanly ways to manipulate people into giving him what he wants. He is an old friend of Gideon and his wife, Suzie, who stops by their home after the bus on which he rides has stopped indefinitely. The younger characters, Babe Brother and Junior, are Gideon's sons. Each of them responds differently to the values their father cultivated in the South. Junior closely emulates his father in terms of taking care of physical tasks that need to be attended around his home and his parents. He has deeply internalized the cultural memory embodied in his father's values, while Babe Brother has an opposite response. He rejects his parents' values because he does not think he lives up to his father's expectations of responsibility and hard work. He also feels that his childhood is a source of pain that he does not want to inflict on his son, Sunny, plus he finds it a hindrance to his professional ascendancy as a loan officer. Babe Brother's rejection shows in his refusal to attend church with his parents. He is also reluctant to encourage his wife to come inside his parents' home when they visit.

Burnett uses parallel editing to magnify moments that establish the distinctions of two masculine identities grounded in the South as shown through Gideon and Harry. One example involves a parallel between Gideon, his wife Suzie, and his oldest son's

family attending church while Babe Brother and his wife Linda have a conversation with Harry at his parents' home. This sequence establishes Babe Brother's gravitation towards Harry's sense of masculinity based in the rural South. Another example parallels an argument between Gideon and Babe Brother with Marsh, a migrant from the South who interrogates Harry about a murder disguised as a lynching that nearly sparked a race riot many years ago.

The use of spatial narration within a conventional narrative structure captures the increasing tension between Gideon's and Babe Brother's staunch positions first established through parallel editing. Other characteristics of Gideon's presentation of his masculine identity embody a strong work ethic and a central focus on familial cohesiveness. Babe Brother, on the other hand, takes his parents for granted when he has his parents babysit his son until the late hours of the morning, and when he forgets his mother's birthday. It reveals selfishness as a characteristic of his masculine identity. In addition, Harry's inclination towards gambling, objectifying women, and violent confrontations are the characteristics of his masculine identity that are embraced by Babe Brother instead of his father's values, which are rejected. Gideon and Babe Brother, while highly contentious towards one another, both share an admiration for Harry. Gideon's trust in Harry blinds him to the fact that other family members are not comfortable with his guest. As Babe Brother becomes seduced by Harry's darker side, Harry is the catalyst for a high level of contention between father and son. The way the historical and contemporary masculinities collide in this complex relationship points to a major challenge Burnett faces when incorporating spatial narration in his film, as "the

past constantly interrupts the present and repetitions and cyclicalities define narration” (Diawara, “Black American Cinema” 13).

The fourth chapter shifts away from Burnett’s films set in South Los Angeles, and focuses on two documentaries from the 2000s. The emphasis is on the construction of a traditional masculine identity and what is at stake with cultural memory. *Nat Turner: A Troublesome Property* (2002) and *Warming by the Devil’s Fire* (2004) are two documentaries that shift the questions about the definitions, constructions, and expressions of self-identity and self-determination to a historical context. These documentaries reflect upon the periods of slavery and Jim Crow segregation to examine how black men fought to escape enslavement. It continues to unveil how they handled the transition from being property to working for property owners for hardly anything. The relationship between both films is that *Nat Turner: A Troublesome Property* reflects an elusive cultural memory, and *Warming by the Devil’s Fire* resembles the site of Burnett’s childhood memory informed by Turner’s confessions, the 1950s South.

Nat Turner: A Troublesome Property follows the 150-year circulation of the narrative of Nat Turner and the rebellion that he led. The story’s basis, a confession from Turner while held captive in Southampton County, Virginia, makes it an elusive narrative because of the vague traces of Turner’s identity. What makes Turner’s narrative powerful is that his attempt to dismantle the institution of slavery is still read as an act of urgency for himself and other enslaved people. A major characteristic is his ability to design a plan to mobilize fellow captives to kill landowners and their wives and children inspired by divine guidance. *Nat Turner: A Troublesome Property* allows for a

more extensive discussion of the legacy of slavery in relation to migration, and how the response to cultural memory shifts between generations.

Burnett uses spatial narration to focus on multiple authors' construction and circulation of Nat Turner's historical narrative through the dramatization of historical events, the use of archival stills and film clips, and talking-head interviews. The film encompasses all of these components to reflect how the audience understands the construction of a cultural memory. This process transpires to the various articulations of Turner's narrative from a collective of authors that either reinforce or directly clash with one another's ideas. Burnett's use of spatial narration in this film through these techniques resembles the strategies that various authors use to recall Turner's narrative. These authors use a foundational source, Thomas R. Gray's "The Confessions of Nat Turner," to construct and present Turner's sense of self-identity and self-determination in relation to the period in which they are writing about him. These interpretations from authors ranging from the abolitionist William Wells Brown, and the educator Randolph Edmunds, to the novelist William Styron, can be read as an expression of their masculine identities through Turner. These expressions are dependent upon their individual appropriations of Turner's narrative and their compliance to the historical moment in which they are writing. Their interpretations also consider their own fundamental understanding of the institution of slavery. Burnett's approach to capturing Turner's story magnifies the elusive nature of not only the subject, but also of the way memories are retained through the migration process. Burnett's treatment of Turner reflects how the title subject serves as a model of black masculinity at different historical moments.

His film demonstrates how these authors attempt to circulate the story of a historical figure within events contemporary to their time.

The documentary *Warming by the Devil's Fire* offers a semiautobiographical narrative in which a blues musician, Buddy, introduces his nephew from Los Angeles, Junior, to blues music during a visit to Mississippi in 1956. The film presents blues music in and of itself as an expression of masculinity that responds to transitions between abolishment of slavery and the implementation of Jim Crow laws throughout the South. The expression through music consists of songs that show a longing of freedom from systematic control over one's work conditions. It also concerns emotional recuperation from an inability to establish a long-lasting love for someone. Burnett uses Buddy, the uncle of the film's central character, Junior, as a guide through the history of the blues and points Junior to landmarks such as Congo Square in New Orleans and the Dockery Plantation, the home of the Mississippi Delta blues. He also shares with his nephew about the way in which post-slavery labor conditions, anxieties from the monitoring of law enforcement, and an understanding of the music's lineage to Africa contribute to how the blues musician comes to identify himself. Burnett uses spatial narration to bridge Buddy's project to write a book about the history of the blues with Junior's completion of the project some decades later.

Buddy's ability to be self-introspective serves as a central characteristic of how a blues musician constructs and presents his masculine identity. Blues music is a response to the conditions to which black men are subjected to in the South between slavery and the Jim Crow South. The songs project personal ambitions, intimate emotions, and desirable impulses that the condition of enslavement never allowed. The film features

archival film clips of performances by blues singers that also contribute to the film's use of spatial narration. These clips either neatly intertwine or serve as departures from the narrative altogether. Both documentaries demonstrate how Burnett, in the early twenty-first century, continues to explore the constructions of black male identities in terms of how they respond to people, physical conditions, and specific historical periods. The films establish an ongoing continuum of how black men continually pursue an autonomous identity based on their performance of labor and demonstration of competency and responsibility.

The use of spatial narration bridges the spaces of the deep South and the western metropolis. In each film, historical clips and dramatizations are integrated to further substantiate the connection between the past and the present and the merging of traditional and contemporary masculine identities. In correspondence with Diawara's concept of bridging disparate black spaces to magnify an obscure aspect of African American culture, Burnett's multiple approaches to chronicle these histories demonstrate how merging these disparate identities reflects the way a filmmaker communicates the cultural history of African American residents in South Los Angeles. The two documentaries discussed in the fourth chapter present the relationship between black spaces and white times in pre-migrant society. The black spaces, as articulated through narratives about escaping enslavement and preserving blues music, attempt to penetrate the structure of white times by way of the literal suppression of black people and the conventional framework in which these stories are told. These documentaries also stand as a model for bridging generational differences, particularly *Warming by the Devil's Fire*. Both documentaries provide a backstory for postwar Los Angeles and the legacy of

the Great Migration and its broken promise in the form of reduced living wage employment. The story of Nat Turner and the efforts to retain the history of the blues explain why this is important.

The conclusion of this project inquires about the correspondence between traditional and contemporary presentations of black working-class masculine identities in South Los Angeles. Burnett's films follow how a sense of self-identity and self-determination is expressed in each of these identities. This notion is informed by how Burnett's generation responds to cultural memory and their immediate history. His fictional films are a collective meditation on masculinity that range over a period of twenty-plus years. The central characters in each of them respond to changes that occur in South Los Angeles and the collective attitudes they produce. Burnett seeks to display how his characters attain an autonomous expression of masculinity. His personal observations of black men inform how these portraits of masculinity contain expressions that disrupt the fine line between disruption and consistency.

Chapter One
Several Friends and The Horse—
The Role of Competency within Traditional and Contemporary
Black Working-Class Male Identities

In this analysis of Charles Burnett's earliest short films, *Several Friends* (1969) and *The Horse* (1973), I discuss characters in each film in regards to their level of competency in handling tasks and their orientation with their immediate ancestral past. I want to identify in both films the way male characters conduct specific duties and the attitudes they reflect based on the energy invested in the task. The second Great Migration and the outcome of Watts Revolt are the basis for how these presentations of masculine identity assess the past and respond to the immediate present. The setting of *The Horse* stands as an allegorical reference to the period of sharecropping, and the geography of *Several Friends* reflects the immediate outcome of the Watts Revolt of 1965.³¹ A result of the revolt is that black working-class men internalize a notion of hopelessness that transforms into a misguided sense of high self-esteem based on rejecting responsibility. The sources and values that determined a black working-class male's sense of masculine identity included a living-wage job, material wealth, and a family to comfortably support. The men of a younger generation conduct themselves with a false sense of confidence because the resources that informed the masculine identity of their migrant elders have been eradicated.

A specific detail that ties to *Several Friends* and *The Horse* is that characters are given a task to complete. Each film's cinematic style utilizes a combination of long takes

³¹ The Watts Revolt of 1965 and the evacuation of the Jim Crow South are two examples of defining tragedies for two generations of black residents in Los Angeles. This chapter seeks to magnify the stagnancy of living-wage employment opportunities in each period.

and long shots that follow the process of how a character pursues a specific task and decides ultimately not to follow through. The handheld camera movement Burnett uses to follow the action is often at a standstill depending on a character's decision-making process. The steps characters in *Several Friends* and *The Horse* take to complete a given task express a sense of their masculine identity in terms of how they approach the process and whether they refuse to follow through.

The Presence of Competency in Black Masculine Identity after the Outcome of the Watts Revolt

The Watts Revolt of 1965 was arguably the definitive moment that determined the distinctions between the generation of migrants and younger residents. The latter group became frustrated with the tactics of their elders towards social justice, and the dwindling of living-wage jobs due to the relocation of plants and factories. The revolt began with a routine traffic stop of brothers Marquette and Ronald Frye by the California Highway Patrol. After their mother intervened by jumping on the backs of the officers, a crowd of onlookers responded by hurling objects, and further physical confrontation with the cops erupted. The action would transfer to the destruction of businesses thought to have economically exploited black residents by selling them tainted merchandise (Horne 308). These events would contribute to the rejection of authority in law enforcement and property ownership as a characteristic of masculine identity among black youth living in South Los Angeles.

The region would face a tragic economic aftermath when plants and factories relocated their facilities to the outskirts of Los Angeles. The slow recovery of the

neighborhood businesses reflected Watts's struggle to reconstruct their economic infrastructure. Local government and neighborhood activists designed different blueprints to pursue an immediate recovery. California Governor Pat Brown organized a commission to investigate the cause of the revolt, the potential catalysts, and the aftermath. The former Central Intelligence Agency Director John McCone led the eight-person commission.³² Judge Earl Broady and Reverend James Jones were the only African Americans appointed. Gerald Horne affirms the following:

It was in this context of sharpened black militance and stiffening white resistance that Governor Brown appointed John McCone to head a panel to investigate what had happened in August 1965 and why. McCone was appointed because his impeccable conservative credentials would provide much-desired credibility for the liberal governor and his party colleague in the White House [Lyndon Johnson] who were fearful that they both would be tarred with the brush of being soft on blacks. (341)

The McCone Commission sought to gather the most tangible facts tied to the activities in Watts that week in August. Horne records that by the end of their investigation, "[the commission would] recommend more spending on preschool programs, class-size reduction, elimination of double sessions in schools, and the like" (343). Critics nevertheless felt the McCone Commission's report overstated the obvious. Additionally, the report ignored deeper catalysts such as unequal distribution of wealth and the concentration of low-income African American residents in a small geographic space.

³² The head of the commission, John McCone, was the head of the Central Intelligence Agency from 1961 through 1965 under Presidents Kennedy and Johnson. Shortly after stepping down from the CIA post, he was asked by California Governor Pat Brown to lead the commission to review the aftermath of the Watts Revolt.

The report's most conspicuous absence was its refusal to include feedback from residents, community leaders, or elected officials that served the region, other than the two black men on the commission.

The McCone Commission reflects a long-standing practice of official accounts that either minimize or altogether ignore residents of color and their perspectives. Burnett's stylistic choices correspond with Third Cinema to avoid the kind of practice in filmmaking that excludes the subjects' perspectives. Teshome Gabriel points to the dichotomy between popular memory and official history in his scholarship as a central component in many of the films he discusses:

Official history tends to arrest the future by means of the past. Historians privilege the written word of the text—it serves as their rule of law. It claims a “center” which continuously marginalizes others. In this way its ideology inhibits people from constructing their own history or histories. Popular memory, on the other hand, considers the past as a political issue. It orders the past not only as a reference point but also as a theme of struggle. For popular memory, there are no longer any “centers” or “margins,” since the very designations imply that something has [been] conveniently left out. (“Towards a critical theory of Third World Films” 54)

The latter part of the chapter discusses how Burnett's cinematic techniques correspond with Third Cinema to privilege popular memory over official history. The discussion of *Several Friends* and *The Horse* in itself illustrates Gabriel's argument that a cyclical pattern is not fixed within one specific period.

Watts '65 and the Immediate Cultural Memory of South Los Angeles

While the Watts Revolt generated a collective expression of outrage from the residents of South Los Angeles, the most immediate comparison was with the Zoot Suit Riots of June 1943. As African American residents would occupy the former Little Tokyo, now rechristened as Bronzeville, they expressed their sympathies with the Mexican Americans attacked by American soldiers who invaded their neighborhoods to attack young men wearing zoot suits. While white and Mexican-American men were clearly identified as the catalysts, Josh Sides notes that “the Navy announced a formal investigation into causes of racial friction, [in] which it was almost immediately assigned to the ‘Negro Problem’” (49). Black residents would nevertheless face accusations for inciting racial violence in Los Angeles even without any involvement. The incident informed anticipatory surveillance and subjugation as a characteristic of masculine identity among black working-class men in South Los Angeles.

In addition to the Zoot Suit Riots, the fight against school discrimination at Jefferson and Jordan high schools was another marker of high racial tension prior to the Watts Revolt. The events at Jefferson and Jordan high schools were residual of prior events that occurred at Fremont High School. As Jeanne Theoharis writes, “[The Fremont High School incidents] in their blatant and violent racism and in the grassroots organizing they produced—provide a different perspective for understanding the racial politics” (29). *California Eagle* editor and publisher Charlotta Bass observed within these altercations that efforts to keep the students from enrolling in classes were so aggressive that images of them were hung in effigy. These actions confirm how “legalized segregation, overt racism, along with an active and varied black freedom

movement, were equally part of the Southern California experience” (Theoharis 28-29). Theoharis’s description of the climate contextualizes the dilemma new migrants faced upon their arrival to Los Angeles. The realities of racial hostility from intolerant whites mean that migrants had to pursue a new kind of mobility to find more spacious living arrangements. Newly arrived residents also had to find jobs that were not locked to rural labor and domestic servitude.

Polarizing disparities between affluent and impoverished blacks forced to live in the same region for many years would increase dramatically after the Watts Revolt. Sides provides a closer description of the demographic that explains why black Los Angeles residents felt disenfranchised:

Despite the bitter persistence of segregation in Los Angeles, by the 1960s blacks performed a wide range of jobs, lived in a variety of neighborhoods, participated in electoral politics, inhabited public space to a degree virtually imaginable before the war. From the perspective of migrants who had moved from areas where opportunities were far more circumscribed than they had ever been in Los Angeles, these gains were even more impressive. How then, so many wondered, could African Americans riot? (172).

The Zoot Suit Riots, battles over school desegregation, and the Watts Revolt are moments of outrage that magnify how the dominant public misunderstands the residents’ sentiments. Much of the frustration came from the fact that Watts was one of the most underfunded regions in the city and one of the most densely populated. Underemployed black and Latino residents were heavily concentrated in public housing complexes (Sides

118).³³ These structures were initially constructed to reduce overcrowding among residents in single-family units throughout South Los Angeles. The public housing projects —Nickerson Gardens, Jordan Downs, Imperial Courts, and Hacienda Village— were built as early as the mid-1940s (Chang 308). The challenges of aggressive police intervention and the economic exploitation of residents from nearby shopkeepers contributed to the frustrations that residents faced before and after the Watts Revolt. It also confirms the greater conundrum of official accounts that either misunderstand or disregard the thoughts of the residents. The defensiveness in response to dismissive attitudes became another characteristic of masculine identity that black working-class men in South Los Angeles adopted.

One of the most disorienting outcomes was the increasingly problematic relations between black residents and Jewish business and property owners. Horne describes the ongoing tensions between both populations:

The Central Avenue blocks, known as Charcoal Alley II, and the original Charcoal Alley, 103rd St.—two of the primary shopping districts in South LA— were both devastated. Weeks after the damage, Richard Marshal of South LA was still seething with anger about how “we, the older people, felt exploited. We wouldn’t buy anything. There were just a bunch of Jews selling us second class merchandise for first class prices.” (109-110)

³³ After the demographic shift, Central Avenue would gain a disparaging reputation for the substandard conditions in which newly arrived migrants lived. A number of units in buildings throughout the street occupied more people than they were intended to hold. Some new residents had even converted garages into living spaces. The local chapters of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the National Urban League directed their focus to help migrants find adequate housing and employment. Sides notes that the situation became so troubling that the Mayor of Los Angeles, Fletcher Bowron, implemented affordable housing policies and other initiatives to help transition migrants to the city (52).

Horne adds that more factors contributed to the tensions between the residents and the business and property owners than just their Jewish identity (110). Sides complements this observation with references to multiple confrontations between law enforcement officers and residents prior to August 1965. In addition, Paul Robinson points out patterns of “white flight” when he states, “Whites rapidly fled from the southwest side of Los Angeles in the 1950s and 1960s. Between 1950 and 1956, more than 125,000 whites left the central city area of Los Angeles. As whites fled central Los Angeles in the 1950s, what had been three separate black communities—each with a distinct regional identity—merged into one contiguous black residential space” (43). The altercation between the California Highway Patrol and the Frye family would reach a boiling point that would flow into the greater parts of Watts.

The responses to excessive monitoring by nearby law enforcement and economic exploitation during that week in August disrupted the conventional wisdom that Los Angeles was the ideal destination for African Americans. Watts hardly saw any substantive results in spite of the recovery efforts pursued based on the commission’s recommendations. A collective sense of apathy would emerge in response to a scarcity of living-wage jobs, a failure to resuscitate the region’s economic infrastructure, and an increasing indifference between younger and older residents. Sides refers to younger residents either born in Los Angeles during World War II or moved to the region at an early age as the “Great Migration Generation.” He explains,

Although the actual number of participants was relatively small, the ideological implications of their participation were great. Sparked and sustained by black anger and White America, the Watts riot also reflected the deepening divide

between the Great Migration and their children. Though casual observers assumed that young rioters were recent arrivals from the South, the greatest number either had been born in Los Angeles or had moved to the city with their parents before 1960. (175)

A characteristic that younger black residents adopted as part of their masculine identity is the dismissiveness towards the values and customs of their elders reared in the South. They found any exhibition of rural characteristics as embarrassing and disregarded their immediate past as declining opportunities contributed to the collective apathy of the region. A film like *Several Friends* further illustrates the apathetic attitudes Sides discusses about a younger generation of black male residents in Los Angeles. Burnett is most concerned a demographic of men who have shifted from anger to apathy. A closer focus on the relationship between the film's narrative and how his apathetic characters respond to particular tasks will be discussed later in the chapter.

The Cultural, Political, and Creative Revival of Watts and the Multiple Black Masculine Identities of the 1960s

There were attempts to revive the cultural and political identity of black residents in South Los Angeles after the Watts Revolt. In place of the church-based activist, a model of great influence in the South, the black revolutionary emerged as the dominant model of masculinity. This particular model is based upon the development of Malcolm X from his initial years in the Nation of Islam in the 1950s to the forming of the Organization for Afro-American Unity (OAAU) before his death in 1965. His philosophies and activities during this period became more of a basis for their agenda

than those of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). The revolutionary adopted a more assertive, aggressive stance against structural racism than the church leaders involved in the Civil Rights movement. These actions and stances were principle characteristics of their masculine identity.

Tommy Lott's proposal for a no-theory theory of black cinema calls for an approach to filmmaking that mirrors this level of political engagement. As he specifies:

The idea of depicting black men as willing to engage in violent acts toward whites was virtually taboo in Hollywood films all the way through the 1960s. But once the news footage of the '60s rebellions, along with the media construction of the Black Panther Party, began to appear, mainstream films such as *In the Heat of the Night* made an effort to acknowledge (albeit to contain) this "New Negro." (86)

Two models are identified from Lott's observation. One model involves the Hollywood presentation of black men as reluctant to engage in violence except when it is a last resort. His reference to *In the Heat of the Night* points to Sidney Poitier's Virgil Tibbs, a Philadelphia-based detective who helps a Mississippi-based police chief to solve a murder. One scene shows Tibbs slapping a plantation owner in response to his initial action. The plantation owner and Chief Gillespie are so shocked by what has happened that neither of them is sure what to do. Another model reflects the use of violence by black revolutionary activists to disrupt systematic oppression and physical subjugation of black people by institutional bodies.

Lott's observation and discussion of these models points to a discord between the dominant presentations of black men in mainstream American cinema and the black male public figures that persisted through news media. A major discrepancy is the

assertiveness of outspoken black men that the dominant moviegoing public still found intimidating such as Malcolm X, Dr. Martin Luther King and Fred Shuttlesworth of SCLC, and Stokely Carmichael to name a few. He adds, “Even with these limits, however, what had made Malcolm X so radical to mainstream television audiences at that time was the fact that he publicly advocated self-defense” (Lott 42). During the peak of Malcolm X’s visibility, Poitier was the most popular black actor. Prior to *In the Heat of the Night*, Poitier appeared in films such as *A Raisin in the Sun* (1961), *Lilies of the Field* (1963), and *To Sir with Love* (1967). These were films that solidified his position in Hollywood as the only notable black male movie star. Poitier was certainly a departure from prior black male stock characters that range from the buck and the coon to the sambo and the Uncle Tom.³⁴ He nevertheless received criticism because he played characters that were considered non-threatening and expressed no kind of confident sexuality.³⁵

In contrast to the new images of violent black men, Burnett’s films capture the banal decision-making processes black men undergo to find the best way to survive. These depictions of black men are peripheral to more familiar models of black masculinity in the 1960s such as the US organization and the Black Panther Party. The

³⁴ In his book *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks*, Donald Bogle describes the coon as an “amusement object and black buffoon. They lacked the single-mindedness of the Tom” (7). Bogle adds that the coon

developed into the most blatant degrading of all black stereotypes. The pure coons emerged as no-account niggers, those unreliable, crazy, lazy, subhuman creatures good for nothing more than eating watermelons, stealing chickens, shooting crap, or butchering the English language. (8)

³⁵ Bogle describes Poitier as, the model integrationist hero. In all his films he was educated and intelligent. He spoke proper English, dressed conservatively, and had the best of table manners. For the mass white audience, Sidney Poitier was a black man who had met their standards. His characters were tame; never did they act impulsively, nor were they threats to the system. They were amenable and pliant. And finally they were non-funky, almost sexless and sterile. (175-176)

apathy that Burnett's central male characters possess sharply contrasts with these models of black masculinity based on the competing activist principles of cultural nationalism evoked by Maulana Karenga of the US Organization and revolutionary nationalism proposed by Alprentice "Bunchy" Carter of the Black Panther Party.³⁶ These competing cultural and political organizations sought to revitalize the region by transforming working-class men into culturally and politically active residents shortly after the revolt. The US Organization embodied cultural nationalism, in which activities included the adoption of ancestral African names, rituals, and fashions to combat an inferiority complex that many black residents had internalized (Painter 325).³⁷

The Los Angeles chapter of the Black Panther Party (BPP) sought a different path of empowerment for residents. The BPP established objectives that would appear compatible with US in terms of cultural enrichment and community building, and they were most vocal about police brutality towards black men. In spite of their similar objectives, their philosophical differences made their relations with one another very antagonistic. As Horne describes, "[Karenga denounced] the BPP for being presumptuous enough to consort with Euro-Americans. In turn, nascent and actual BPP

³⁶ Scot Brown further explains the basis for the rivalry between US and the BPP:

The rivalry between the two organizations set in motion a binary discourse grounded on false assumptions. The choice between African culture as represented by images of military resistance and a central value system and rituals is a manufactured one. US also saw itself as an ally of anticolonial liberation struggles in both Asia and Africa, and actively supported these movements. However, nuances of this sort were replaced by sectarian allegations as the US/Panther conflict became intensified by violent clashes in the late sixties and as power politics within the Black movement came to supplant an initial focus on struggle with the state or White cultural hegemony. (115-116)

³⁷ Brown adds,

The US member's name change, from English to Kiswahili or another African language, relayed the seriousness of the member's conversion and commitment to 'revolutionary' change to the outside world, sometimes to the dismay of family members. It also served as a defining rite in the implicit dimension of the initiation process and intra-group social order. When an advocate was given an African name, the person would either hyphenate his or her English last name with the African one, or have a totally African last name. (58)

supporters charged Karenga with recruiting gangsters with the aid of the probation department and the HRC” (201).

In their efforts to rehabilitate Watts, the BPP pursued revolutionary nationalism through challenging the oppressive practices of capitalism and fighting for racial and social justice on behalf of poverty-stricken residents (Joseph, “Introduction,” 3). The leader of the L.A. chapter was Alprentice “Bunchy” Carter, a former leader of a street gang called the Slausons. Carter would join the BPP after befriending the Minister of Information from the central Oakland chapter in prison, Eldridge Cleaver (Chang 311). The tense rivalry between the US Organization and the Black Panther Party would culminate at a Black Student Union meeting at UCLA in 1969. An intense argument between Carter and a member of US Organization would result in his death alongside another slain BPP member, John Huggins (Chang 312). Bunchy Carter would remain an important figure in the discussion of the construction and representation of a black masculine identity in the 1960s because he was a transformative figure whose views shifted from being a neighborhood gang member to emerging into a leadership position within an organization engaged in community activism and service. The lethargic nature of Burnett’s characters in *Several Friends* contrasts with the leadership styles of Carter and Karenga. Nevertheless, Burnett provides a space to include these men in the later chapter of black masculinity during this period.

In spite of their individual models for helping black people cultivate self-empowerment, the Black Panther Party and the US Organization embodied models of black masculinity that attracted criticism for internalizing a patriarchal subjugation of

women thought to be targeted in their struggles against white-dominated power structures. Horne confronts the mentality that men in these organizations would adopt:

Part of the liberation proclaimed by many male black nationalists in L.A. was the “right” to emulate [the] patriarchy of the Euro-American community. Moreover, the influence of gangs and the lumpenproletariat with their penchant for settling disputes through violence and their de-valuing of women through prostitution complicated male-female relations in the black community. (11)

Horne’s quote points to the fact that such organizations did not possess a capacity to evaluate how their ideologies can produce unanticipated consequences. He asserts that the struggle was more for male privilege and patriarchal control than it was for dismantling systematic oppression towards black people in an economic, political, and physical sense.

A commonality between what Horne observes and what Burnett presents is the obsession of men to dominate and control, which is often considered a central characteristic of masculine identity. The analysis of *Several Friends* discusses how the characters manipulate time to their advantage as shown in the long takes, yet their mismanagement of time obstructs them from completing a given task. Their attitudes demonstrate the irony of patriarchal privilege in that these men possess a sense of entitlement to accept and reject what they want, but their attitude prevents them from attaining a genuine sense of freedom. The amount of energy invested in cultural and political activity hardly transferred towards the development of a strong economic infrastructure that could increase the livelihood of black working-class men. The strengthening of the region’s economic infrastructure may not have gone further than

providing limited employment opportunities for the working poor, but a major oversight was failing to gain access to public funds for underserved populations in South Los Angeles.

Outside of proletariat activists and cultural nationalists were other black men whose pursuits toward living-wage employment and economic development were also examples of contemporary masculine identities. Ted Watkins found work at the Ford plant in Pico Rivera shortly after serving in World War II. He would become an active member with the United Auto Workers, and he launched the Watts Labor Community Action Committee (WLCAC) once he ascended in the ranks of union leadership. The WLCAC would pursue initiatives that included petitioning the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors to build the King/Drew Medical Center, which would open in 1972. Watkins also sought to acquire vacant lots to provide employment opportunities for young black men between the ages of seven and twenty-one (Sides 186). Watkins's working-class identity closely aligns with Burnett's male characters in both films. He exists in the periphery of more popular models of black masculinity in the 1960s in the same manner. The analysis of *Several Friends* considers at length the how the absence of a work ethic and initiative that Watkins exhibited informs these characters' decisions. He is discussed alongside the characters of *Several Friends* not so much as a model for Burnett's characters to emulate, but to fit the film within a larger narrative of black masculinity in South Los Angeles in the late '60s.

The correspondence between Burnett's male characters and the residents of South Los Angeles is that both demographics and representations remain in the periphery of more popular accounts of the Watts Revolt. Recovery efforts within and outside South

Los Angeles in response to the damaged region had to come directly from the community due to the fact that hardly anything was made available to the residents. In addition to activist organizations, artists who worked in the motion picture industry contributed their time and expertise to help residents use creative outlets to convey their perspectives. One particular initiative was the Watts Writers Workshop, an artistic outreach to residents in Watts and throughout South Los Angeles. Award-winning screenwriter Budd Schulberg began assembling other contributors and designing structures for the workshop as a way to demonstrate his outrage towards the response to the region. Instructors and participants gathered at the Watts Happening Coffee House to work on developing their craft as poets, dramatists, and novelists while in correspondence with other community-based initiatives. The Watts Writers Workshop shared space with a jazz ensemble led by accomplished jazz pianist Horace Tapscott, plus other community arts outreach facilitators that organized classes for painting, drawing, and sculpture. Tapscott founded Pan Afrikan People's Arkestra, and his purpose for the collective was to serve as a jazz ensemble that widely experimented with the genre through jam sessions and rehearsed performances while cultivating the talent of young, emerging musicians.³⁸

The Watts Writers Workshop reached out to marginalized residents and encouraged them to articulate their life experiences. The workshop attracted many residents, yet some black nationalists had problems with Schulberg's presence as a white man convening a workshop to cultivate the literary talents of budding black writers. Some attendants would deliberately disrupt the workshop sessions because they felt

³⁸ Horace Tapscott was an integral part of the jazz scene based in South L.A. He founded the Pan Afrikan People's Arkestra in 1961 as an outlet for the free jazz compositions he learned at Jefferson High School. Their approach to playing jazz reflected their social and political sentiments. They were proponents of the concept of self-determination, one who is in control of their own expression and resources.

Schulberg was a white outsider who placed limitations on their creativity. Horne characterizes Schulberg's interaction with participants as condescending, adding that "the disintegration of the Writers Workshop and related efforts was a reflection of [how] white chauvinism could clash with black militance and derail the most laudable of efforts" (332). In spite of the increasing polarization that would lead to the workshop's collapse, a poetry anthology (*From the Ashes*) and an NBC television special (*The Angry Voices of Watts*) would emerge as the participants' definitive body of work. Poems by emerging writers such as Kamau Daaod, Johnie Scott, Quincy Troupe, and Harry Dolan would collectively provide a counter-narrative to the McCone Commission. Their poems were first-hand observations and sentiments directly from the area prior to the revolt and in response to the aftermath.

The use of free verse in the poetry of the participants resembled how Burnett and his L.A. Rebellion colleagues used cinematic conventions to articulate the experiences of dispossessed residents in South Los Angeles. The following excerpt from Johnie Scott's "Watts, 1966" conveys his observations about the actions during the Watts Revolt and the immediate aftermath:

My mind burned with the ache
 to get away...escape the bestriken, howling rabble.
 I wanted a place to sit and there ponder...a spot away
 from them and the black women who shouted "Rape" and the
 old men slobbering their words
 and said stories with their
 magnificently wine-twisted mouths. (Scott, 46)

Scott's poem centralizes introspection as a characteristic of masculine identity because the poem reflects his eyewitness account of the revolt and how it continues to influence the area. The technical approaches reveal objectives to magnify the lives of black residents in South Los Angeles. Larry Neal offers this assessment of poetry from the Black Arts Movement and the function their writing serves:

The poet, the writer, is a key bearer of culture. Through myth, he is the manipulator of both the collective conscious and unconscious....Without spirit, the substance of all of his material accomplishments means essentially nothing. Therefore, what one might consider is a system of politics and art that is as fluid, functional, and as expansive as black music. (55)

Scott's recollection of the events and outcomes of the Watts Revolt and his introspection emulates Neal's description of the poetry and overall art that emerges from the Black Arts Movement. Similar to Burnett and the other filmmakers I have discussed, their visual artist contemporaries used accessible found objects as their medium to convey the lives of black working-class men living in South Los Angeles. Assemblage, or junk art, is a mixed-media form of three-dimensional art that consists of found objects. The Watts Towers, created by Simon Rodia, is an example of an assemblage monument that stands as an official landmark in Los Angeles.³⁹ As Daniel Widener explains, "Part of the benefit of assemblage art was the extent to which it allowed cultural characteristics common throughout the African diaspora—selective appropriations and the alteration of meaning through new juxtapositions—to find a place in the visual and plastic arts" (173).

³⁹ Simon Rodia began work on the Watts Towers in 1921, and would complete them in 1954. The display includes "seven towers, a gazebo, a ship, and a one hundred forty-four wall, the towers occupy a triangular corner lot set amid low-slung bungalow houses on 107th Street in Watts. Bottles, fan-shaped shell patterns, and colored glass mosaics lace the sides of the site, which is dominated by two central towers that rise to a height of nearly one hundred feet" (Widener 228).

Widener's description of assemblage points to a similar function of narration, in that found objects are used similarly to varying cinematic techniques that merges disparate masculine identities separated by past traditions and present realities.

The product is consistent with other artistic mediums that portray the experiences and sentiments of marginalized populations. The aftermath of Watts made assemblage a profound way to document the climate of South Los Angeles because the artists were creating their work out of a demolished space. It was emulative of the efforts of the black male activists mentioned earlier in the chapter to pursue transformative results while using minimal resources. The artists and activists reached out to engage underserved communities to improve their neighborhoods. I am most interested in finding out how Burnett's characters depart from displaying this kind of initiative and compassion and possess a more problematic way to express their notion of masculinity.

John Outterbridge is an example of a black male artist who found assemblage to be an important artistic strategy. Outterbridge was a proponent of conveying social and political consciousness through art, similar to the sentiment Burnett communicates throughout his films. He and his counterparts wanted to make art of the moment that reflected how the community was affected by the destruction of the landscape in Watts. Many of the surrounding businesses never recovered, and there was hardly any effort to resuscitate Watts's economic infrastructure.

Assemblage was also used by these artists to communicate the relationship between the residents and the region in which they live. Outterbridge, like many of his contemporaries, used discarded items to create his pieces. Outterbridge presented a piece at the "Black Artists on Art" exhibit in Glendale, California entitled "Song for My

Father.” The piece contains a truck without wheels that dumps out a pile of woodchips, a stand-in for manure (Widener 153). Outterbridge’s piece was a tribute to his father, a blue collar worker who performed this kind of work while the artist was growing up. It reflects the lapse of living-wage employment for young black men: jobs were not available like they had been for the older generation when they arrived to Los Angeles from the South as migrants. It also references the song of the same title by jazz pianist Horace Silver. The collaborative spirit of these black male artists fused with an initiative to use available objects to create art that genuinely reflected the lives of residents in South Los Angeles. The way in which Outterbridge would use found objects to convey the state of black men living in Watts literally identifies self-determination as a key component of how they construct and present their masculine identities because it demonstrates the creation of art through available discarded material. Outlets to instruct youth on how to develop their craft and for artists to exhibit their work were vital to the region. One such venue was the Watts Towers Art Center. Outterbridge and Judson Powell were the first two directors, and each was responsible for organizing classes at affordable rates for neighborhood children.

Similar to Outterbridge’s role as a director of an outreach program, a contemporary of his named Charles White was most influential in his role as a faculty member at the Chouinard Art Institute (now CalArts) nearly a decade after arriving in Los Angeles in 1956. As much as he was a celebrated artist in his own right, White helped provide a gateway for emerging black artists to exhibit their work. These artists would eventually become students that he directly mentored, much like the community of film students at UCLA who collaborated frequently with Charles Burnett. The visual

artists also directly involved residents in the artistic process like their filmmaking counterparts from the L.A. Rebellion. The purpose was to revive a sense of cultural memory and develop a desire to rebuild the region.

The disappearance of cultural memory is a major concern for Burnett because he feels it will threaten to separate generations and eliminate a framework for lifelong communication between young and old. The inclusion of these artists and their formative approaches to each of their respective mediums is important for understanding the characteristics within black working-class men that inform the construction and presentation of their masculine identities. The relationship between the formative process and the way the subjects of the medium are captured lies at the heart of the analyses of *Several Friends* and *The Horse*.

Tomás Gutiérrez Alea's argument about the function of the short film offers an understanding of how Burnett uses this medium to address the level of competency his black male characters demonstrate.⁴⁰ He asserts that the length of the short film "presupposes a more elaborated structure than the newsreel and more complexity in treating a theme. Consequently, the form allows the filmmaker to go into greater depth in terms of both information and analysis" (117). Alea's description is consistent with Burnett's efforts to magnify the outcome of Watts and the legacy of slavery and sharecropping to determine how these factors contribute to one's expression of his masculine identity. Alea's explanation is also compatible with what Diawara states about

⁴⁰ Alea was one of many Cuban filmmakers and critics who studied at the Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia in Rome. The fundamental conventions of Italian Neorealism were identified by Ana M. Lopez as the use of non-professional actors, location shooting, available light, handheld cameras, and reference to immediate history. These conventions would transfer into the Cuban films of the 1950s and '60s. Lopez would add that these conventions were found to be most effective because they "explicitly rejected the Hollywood mode of production" (140).

the function of spatial narration in African American independent cinema. Each of Burnett's films contains a more introspective form of storytelling not determined by a formula of conflict, climax, and resolution. The narrative structure instead allows for a close observation of how a notion of male identity is assumed.

The Presence of Competency in the Masculine Identities of Burnett's Short Films

The landscape and historical situation of each of these short films directly influence the way black male characters construct their masculine identities. *Several Friends* is set four years after the Watts Revolt, and many of the black male characters have conceded the pursuit of living-wage employment to an apathetic attitude where survival is a priority over stability. These men reject any opportunity for emotional investment in the people and events that surround them. *The Horse* is set in the present day, yet its ambiguous rural setting suggests an imagining of the Jim Crow South and the sharecropping system to envision ways black male laborers are infantilized by the system and must break out of it. The examples from both films demonstrate how Burnett uses the long take to chronicle the way his male characters handle their assigned duties and develop a process to either complete them or disregard them altogether. The uninterrupted action of the long take demands the audience to concentrate on Burnett's placement of his characters within the mise-en-scène and their responses to on and off-screen actions.

The long take in *Several Friends* allows the audience to see how Andy, Gene, and Bracy respond to spaces ranging from the parking lot of a liquor store and someone's living room to their garage and their kitchen. The first episode takes place in the parking

lot of a liquor store. The four men in the scene (including Andy and Bracy) and a woman debate over whether or not they should intervene in a fight in front of the store. The second episode occurs in Andy's living room, in which he goes to great lengths to not go to the store to pick up chicken for dinner. The third episode finds Andy and Gene conflicted over how they should fix a car, and become distracted when Bracy tells them about a party where they can meet a lot of white women like the one who accompanies him. The fourth episode shows Andy and Gene struggling to move a washing machine while Bracy stands and waits to take them to the party. In each episode, the men possess an inattentiveness that distracts them from completing a task, yet they each present this characteristic as an empowered position from which they can choose to reject any kind of follow-through.

The spaces found in *The Horse* alternate between the porch of an abandoned house, the dilapidated barn where the horse resides, a windmill, and the barren field surrounded by each of these physical points. The porch is where three of the four white men wait for the boy's father, as the fourth white man walks between the porch and the field. The boy walks with the horse between the windmill and the barn. The horse's wound shows that he is slowly dying, as is the system of sharecropping and Jim Crow. Burnett uses long takes throughout *The Horse* to reveal how the eradication of the farm's physical appearance and the horse's declining condition suggest that the erasure of cultural memory is a characteristic among black working-class men who attempt to construct and present an empowered masculine identity.

Several Friends: False Confidence and the Internalization of Collective Apathy

The setting of *Several Friends* reflects the latter part of a cycle of stagnant labor and employment opportunities for black men. The central characters reflect the increased hopelessness of young black men in the region through a false sense of confidence.

Andy, Gene, and Bracy face a crisis in their efforts to construct and present their own ideas of what it means to be a man. The way they perform assigned tasks contradicts any sense of confidence and competency they perceive themselves to have. Their efforts reflect not self-discipline and focus, but obliviousness and apathy to what needs to be done and failure to complete it. Their attitudes reflect an internalization of the failed outcomes of the Watts Revolt. These outcomes include an inability to revive the economic infrastructure and restore the neighborhood resources that once existed before the action took place. The residents eventually gave up on any hope that the region's economy would be resuscitated in spite of attempts to pursue a cultural revival in the neighborhood.

The first episode shows Andy and Bracy gathering money to buy a bottle of wine with two other friends. One of them, Deloras, spends the duration of the scene convincing everyone the importance of intervening in a fight between two men in front of the liquor store. In the second episode, Gene and his children visit Andy and his live-in partner, Cass to brief him on the state of one of his sons who had surgery performed on him. Cass spends the latter part of the scene trying to convince Andy to get chicken from the nearby store to prepare dinner. The third episode finds Andy and Gene disputing over the most efficient way to fix a car. Bracy drops by to introduce them to a white woman he has been seeing, and promises to take them to a party where there will be a lot more

white women. In the fourth episode, Bracy becomes frustrated with the two men because they are struggling to move a washing machine from point A to point B. Each of these episodes shows an alternation between the use of the long take and the long shot and jump cuts. The editing that threads the film's loose narrative structure allows for the shift between long takes, long shots, and jump cuts. It emulates Diawara's idea of spatial narration that ties the actions shown onscreen with the sentiments of people who reside in the region. An analysis of how the characters develop (or fail to do so) over time illuminates a greater cycle of stagnated opportunities for black men to either pursue living-wage jobs or pursue enriching lives.

The long take in *Several Friends* captures the action of the characters without any interruption to follow their decision-making process. Burnett uses the long take in the first episode to introduce the film's central characters with two of their friends. They are shown in a car waiting for something to happen. When a fight begins in front of the liquor store, Burnett contrasts the action that he captures with jump cuts with the single shot of Deloras and Andy debating on whether or not to intervene. Burnett uses jump cuts to follow Deloras getting out of the car to stop the fight when she is interrupted by an onlooker who tries to flirt with her. Jump cuts are also used in the second episode when Cass asks Andy to purchase some chicken from the nearby grocery store to prepare dinner. Andy responds by turning up the music very loudly on the record player. He pretends to dance with Cass to ignore her request. Burnett ties the jump cuts with the increased volume of the music that drowns out Cass's voice. When Andy agrees to do so, he observes his own slothfulness when he states that he needs to take a bath.

Burnett uses jump cuts in his exchange with Cass to show how he deliberately attempts to ignore her request. The first two scenes portray Andy as someone who is very reluctant to do anything that is asked of him. His doubtful remarks are informed by his refusal to acknowledge what is happening. He displays a negative attitude and pursues no initiative when he is either trying to dodge running an errand or succumbing to distraction while trying to complete a task. Andy's refusal to acknowledge and intervene in the fight reflects a collective response from young black male residents of South Los Angeles who have watched the resources of their neighborhood disappear over time. In spite of the efforts of cultural and political activists and community-based artists that conducted outreach, these men still feel as if they are on the periphery and have no motivation to make any significant contributions.

The subsequent two episodes embed long shots within the long takes and continue to reinforce the anxiety that creates a lack of initiative. In the episode where Andy and Gene are shown fixing the car, Burnett uses wide, lengthy shots to capture their approach towards completing the task. The sequence in which Andy and Gene are fixing the car also contains a long take that shows their lethargic approach towards completing the task. Andy is very anxious about the car falling on top of him while complaining about dirt falling into his eyes. A significant shot in this scene is when Gene is underneath the hood of the car. The camera follows him from the car to the toolbox so that he can grab a wrench. As the camera pans, Andy continues to complain to Gene about taking too long of a break and ultimately not coming back. The moment reinforces how easily Andy and Gene are inclined to distraction that they are responsible for themselves. It is another

moment where the long take captures unproductive activity while the camera is in a fixed position.

The final long take occurs in the film's final sequence. The camera captures Andy and Gene from a high angle as they try to move a washing machine. The men spend a great deal of time arguing over what should be done while being barely able to move it. There is no clear direction to determine how the task must be completed and the steps that need to be taken. Bracy offers nothing more than a plan that materializes into nothing while he stands and watches. The long take is followed by subsequent shots of the three men sharing a bottle of Boone's Farm wine at the kitchen table. The final shot is of Bracy's disappointed face. At this point, Andy and Gene have decided not to continue to move the machine and are left disappointed that they cannot make the party.

Each of these examples of the long take shares a common set of features that begin with central characters that perform tasks they fail to complete. In the earlier example of the long take, Deloras is the only person who shows any initiative when she tries to keep the liquor store fight from getting worse. She is unable to intervene because a man distracts her from going towards the fight, an interruption reflected by the jump cuts used by Burnett. Andy's doubtful self-fulfilling prophecies and Gene's overall incompetency serve as their own distractions from their tasks. Each example of a long take also involves constant bickering between the men which results in no one offering to complete the proposed task, and they ultimately reveal Andy's lack of initiative and sensitivity to distraction as characteristics of his masculine identity.

The Horse: The Competency of the Black Male Laborer and the Potential Eradication of Cultural Memory

Like *Several Friends*, *The Horse* uses long takes throughout the film to illustrate the anticipation of four men and a boy who wait for his father to come and kill a horse. The film alternates the long takes with close-ups to capture the slow unraveling of either their distress or sustenance of patience. The four white men are the first to attract the close attention of the camera as they wait at a house on an abandoned farm, while a black boy tends for a wounded horse with a manner suited for last rites. This dynamic positions the black boy with a horse and four white men, as they all wait for the boy's father. To return to Ntongela Masilela, the onscreen presence of the subjects literally visualizes black labor and white capital. Black labor is presented in the boy's attentive care to the horse, while white capital is shown through in the monitoring presence of the four white men. The boy exhibits the characteristic of patience and attentiveness as an expression of masculine identity. His focus on the horse suggests an expectation of black male laborers to do what they are told.

The Horse's reference to sharecropping is a foundational point to illuminate limited opportunities for black men to obtain living-wage employment that encourages a dignified sense of masculinity. The analysis of this film focuses on the presence of black male through a boy and his father, each who has to perform a duty in the horse's preparation to die. The functions of spatial narration enable a cinematic continuity that traces the historical presence of black labor and connects it to a contemporary crisis. It magnifies the stagnant state of black male labor in the United States and the cycle of diminished opportunities.

The farm where the narrative is set functions both as a site of cultural memory and a metaphor for the system of sharecropping that points to the minimal extension of work opportunities. The white male characters who sit at the abandoned house serve as agents responsible for sustaining this labor practice. The black boy is shown as the infantilized laborer whose focus on the horse makes him appear oblivious to their presence. When a shot of the four men, the boy, and the horse are shown, it points to the exploitative hierarchy of labor and property ownership. Burnett magnifies the scarcity of work of black men, but also suggests the possibility of subversion when the men in charge are shown to be at the mercy of the laborer's arrival. To further illustrate how the continuing absence of the boy's father amplifies the anxiety of the four men, shots of the boy are captured at a longer duration than what is shown in a conventional Hollywood narrative. For a long time, the boy appears to be moving very slowly, if not completely still. This becomes more evident when the boy is shown with the horse. His back is turned to the men as he tends to the horse, while the man in charge turns towards the others who just arrived. The following shots consist of an alternation between close-ups and long shots, during which the boy places dirt on the horse's wound. His actions suggest the black male laborer is an infantile figure unable to see himself beyond his primary functions.

A sequence begins later in the film where the boy is walking the horse towards a windmill while the camera captures them walking away. The next image is a long shot where the boy walks the horse past a bush and a shed. It follows with a close-up of the boy allowing the horse to drink the water. The sequence concludes with a shot of the horse's foot. The boy and the horse do not appear in the same shot until the film's

conclusion when the boy's father finally arrives. The boy and the horse appear in the same space as the man in charge and the boy's father. He loads the gun, and this image is followed with a response shot of the men watching him and a shot of the boy covering his ears. The shot fires as the boy removes his hands. His startled reaction is shown in a freeze frame, the final image of the film. The boy's startled response is the only emotive action he performs throughout the film. It suggests an awakening of sorts, a potential to see himself beyond the duties he is assigned.

The boy's care for the horse offers two characteristics within these expressions of masculinity. It shows a commitment to complete the task of tending to the horse's wound. It is as if the boy is performing the last rites of the horse, a stand-in for the slow decline of an oppressive and rigidly stratified system of labor. Burnett's presentation of the son and father ties to Nell Irvin Painter's assessment of what "work" means in the context of sharecropping:

[The word "work"] focused on crops raised for the market and differed from what freedpeople wanted. They fully intended to work, but less for the market or for the good of other people. They meant to work the land, but more to raise crops to feed themselves and their families. They would no longer labor in gangs or work to the point of utter exhaustion. (143)

The laborers' efforts to provide adequate resources were undermined by the extraction of their earnings from the landowners. Painter offers a closer look at how this practice was enacted: "Sharecropping farmers raised crops for sale, notably cotton and tobacco, and shared with owners the profits after sale.... As it turned out, farmers lost out to the owners all too often. At best, sharecropping families made a few hundred dollars per

year. At worst, they became mired in never-ending debt” (143). The film depicts the system’s slow decline in a way that mirrors how sharecroppers slowly climbed out of debt, if possible. It shows a potential impossibility for a black man to construct and present a masculine identity because he is mired in working for virtually no earnings.⁴¹

To show how the power dynamics are subtly reversed, the film forces the audience to pay closer attention to the duties that are being performed. A high level of concentration demands focus on the subjects because of how they are dwarfed by the landscape that surrounds them. The use of the long take in this context is consistent with how Gabriel describes its functions in the films of Third Cinema. He contends that the long take helps restore cultural memory. In *The Horse*, the basis of cultural memory is the recollection of this structure of labor practiced in this period. Gabriel proclaims that in a Third World context, long shots and long takes encompass a “nostalgia” for the vast presence of natural projects, plus it “constitute[s] part of an overall symbolization of a Third World thematic orientation, i.e., the landscape depicted ceases to be mere land or soil [that] acquires a phenomenal quality which integrates humans with the general drama of existence itself” (“Towards a critical theory of Third World Films” 33). Burnett uses these conventions from Third Cinema to portray a declining practice of sharecropping in the South, while the farm itself also serves as a site of racial terror. The laws of the Jim Crow South control the limited labor opportunities of black men during this time.

⁴¹ Painter adds:

In the 1890s and the early twentieth century, lynchings often became white community rituals. Special trains carried spectators to the scene, and professional photographers made picture postcards for sale. Lynching victims were tortured, mutilated, and killed slowly to ensure the maximum of pain and humiliation. These lynchings were staged to entertain spectators and intimidate black people. Black children who witnessed lynchings identified with the victims and remained permanently traumatized. (180-181)

The function of lynching will be further discussed in the fourth chapter.

Lynching and other forms of physical dismemberment were used to suppress black men. The long take restores cultural memory by concentrating on the tasks that the boy performs.

Burnett uses a narrative structure that complies with Diawara's description of black independent films to explore this historical phenomenon: "These films are concerned with the contemporary specificity of identity, the empowerment of Black people through mise-en-scène, and the rewriting of history. Their narratives contain rhythmic and repetitious shots, going back and forth between the past and the present" ("Black American Cinema" 10). In the case of *The Horse*, the past and the present appear in the same space as the film's temporal ambiguity enables a historical reading of the setting and its subjects. The sudden collapse of this simultaneity happens when the boy's father fires the gunshot. This final moment implies an abrupt yet necessary transition for African Americans out of an oppressive system. The killing of the horse is not itself an act of self-determination, but it represents a potential catalyst to disrupt these ongoing practices.

Conclusion: Limited Labor Opportunities after the Watts Revolt

Through these presentations of black masculinity in *Several Friends* and *The Horse*, Burnett magnifies the performance of labor by black men in two different historical moments to both revive cultural memory among black working-class residents in South Los Angeles and point to cyclical practices that continue to disadvantage them. The mid-1960s would bring generational shifts that would signal the demise of the region's economic infrastructure due to diminished resources. This urgency is a response

to how the region would undergo a tremendous deterioration in subsequent years. Later chapters will discuss the transfer of the source of employment from the manufacturing sector to the service sector. This shift would open a peripheral thread for a violent underground economy of drug and weapon sales among gangs in the 1970s and '80s. These changes would ultimately shape the identity of black-working class men, plus it would exacerbate existing tensions along class and generational lines that will be discussed in later chapters.

In *Killer of Sheep*, which is discussed in the next chapter, Burnett applies a similar stylistic approach as shown in *Several Friends* and finds himself in the same kind of production situation. Location shooting and the casting of actual residents combine with a fictional narrative to effectively reflect the lives of black working-class men who earn declining wages at the remaining factory jobs. The portable technology used within this production environment allows Burnett to capture how the protagonist, Stan, either adjusts or surrenders to these circumstances. Unlike Andy, Gene, and Bracy in *Several Friends*, or the father and son in *The Horse*, Stan's stagnant, exhausted presence responds to the exhausting conditions of his job and the meager pay he earns. His employment and his traumatic response to his immediate ancestral past affect his ability to become intimate with his wife and his attentiveness towards his children. He struggles to find a reason to remain resilient, or even to determine if it is possible for him to do so. The analysis of *Killer of Sheep* in the next chapter explores how the long take and spatial narration chronicle Stan's presentation of a contemporary masculine identity and his sparse and subtle gestures. The exhausting conditions of his job, the increasing danger of

his neighborhood, and his refusal to acknowledge his immediate ancestral past inform Stan's struggles to connect with his family and neighbors.

Chapter Two

Killer of Sheep: The Multiple Battles to Sustain Self-Identity

In Charles Burnett's first feature-length film, *Killer of Sheep*, the analysis focuses on the functions of cinematography, sound, and an episodic narrative structure to construct and express a contemporary black working-class male identity in the face of declining living-wage employment.⁴² The contemporary black-working class male identity in the film is a response to the outcome of the Watts Revolt after a decade has passed. The film's main protagonist, Stan, is a slaughterhouse worker who must overcome the grueling conditions of his job and the traumatic hold his immediate ancestral past has on him. These factors block Stan from being a productive laborer, husband, father, and friend. Each of these roles demands that Stan possess responsibility and compassion as components of a masculine identity that considers the well-being of others.

Killer of Sheep uses distinctive cinematic techniques that trace the development of Stan's self-identity and self-determination occurs in three specific spaces. The first space is his home, where his relationship with his wife is absent of any intimacy. His insomniac condition makes him non-responsive to his wife's burning passion, and it produces a silence that unveils her increasing frustration. In his work space, the camera alternates between Stan conversing with his friends in three different settings. They range from his kitchen, to an apartment where a car motor he wants is located, and the highway where the car in which he is traveling gets a flat tire. Stan and his friends

⁴² Throughout *Killer of Sheep*, Burnett uses the episodic sequencing of scenes and the placement of subjects and objects within the mise-en-scène to execute Diawara's notion of spatial narration. The most notable example is Burnett's use of songs from a prior generation as transitional points that can be described as "cultural restoration, a way for Black filmmakers to reconstruct Black history, and to posit specific ways of being Black Americans in the United States" ("Black American Cinema" 13).

pursue opportunities to improve their earnings; yet they ultimately fail because they forget some important detail. Burnett uses the long shot, the long take, and an episodic narrative structure to reveal these spaces as sites for Stan to resolve his crises, and so determine and control his masculine identity.

The Question of Cultural Memory in the Cinematic Execution of *Killer of Sheep*

Killer of Sheep uses the long shot and the long take in multiple shots within a thread of episodes in the narrative to draw distinct parallels between the idle activity of children and the stagnation of living-wage employment available to residents. The structure allows special attention to the spaces where children spend time with each other outside of adult supervision. One of these spaces is along a railroad track, where the children play with debris from abandoned buildings. Children are also shown in a couple of neighborhood spaces where boys and girls exchange contentious sentiments, such as an alley where a boy attempts to bully his way through a group of girls playing double-dutch. Another space is an apartment complex where the combativeness between boys and girls mirrors a conflict between a Vietnam veteran and the mother of his children who is aiming a gun at him. Both scenarios exemplify moments where interactions between males and females are most tense. They present a characteristic of masculine identity in contemporary South Los Angeles where men exhibit a hyper-aggressiveness to conceal deep insecurities.

Killer of Sheep's cinematography, sound, and narrative structure in each of these spaces captures the internal and external obstacles that exist, the conflicts these obstacles create, and a closer observation of black working-class men. He uses many long takes

and long shots in the described spaces, and the subjects found in these shots will be further examined. He also uses songs from an earlier period to illustrate Stan's struggle with cultural memory from his immediate past. The actions of Burnett's working-class male characters illuminate the frustrations of obtaining self-identity and cultivating self-determination that persist from childhood through adulthood.

The film's episodic narrative structure is discussed later in the chapter as revealing the disparate spaces that reflect the obstacles Stan faces with his family, friends, and his job. The function of these spaces is to point to transitional moments of Stan's evolving sense of self, the current state of South Los Angeles, and the current state of the black working-class man. To understand the function of cinematography, sound, and an episodic narrative structure to magnify the characteristics of Stan's masculine identity, I want to discuss the historical context of the film through the aftermath of the Watts Revolt, the legacy of the Moynihan Report, and increasing class disparities among black residents.

Killer of Sheep also incorporates Diawara's concept of spatial narration. The episodic structure of the narrative arranges scenes that do not follow successively, yet they are used to draw a sharp parallel between the obstacles in adults' lives and the actions of children that suggest a cycle of problematic life decisions. The boys' wayward actions lead them into harmful abandoned areas. They also find themselves in arguments with girls that can land them in trouble. Both scenarios are shown alongside Stan's attempts to attain stability over his life and control over who he is and what he can manage.

The film's narrative structure contains a sequence of scenes that focus on their spatial arrangement based on character development. The action is not determined by a more conventional narrative structure that announces the conflict Stan faces, the climactic moment where he obtains a moment of clarity, and a resolution that demonstrates the clarity he has reached. *Killer of Sheep's* spatial arrangement intertwines scenes of children playing in a vacant lot in their neighborhood with Stan working at the slaughterhouse. This structure reveals the cycle of poverty and underemployment, the working conditions of low-wage jobs, and the way individuals become desensitized to confiding their feelings to their families and neighbors.

The convergence of observational documentary filmmaking techniques with the film's narrative structure focuses on how his characters respond to their interior and exterior physical environment.⁴³ The long take merges with a wide shot to capture their actions as a stylistic approach that reveals the dilapidated presence of Watts and its neighboring regions. The technique within a technique magnifies the deteriorating physical landscape that exists nearly a decade after the turbulent week of events in August 1965. Despite the costs, including the many fatalities, a plan for policy-making and structural change through economic development was not pursued.

The Migrant Past and South Los Angeles in the 1970s and 1980s

Burnett made *Killer of Sheep* in the early 1970s as his thesis project for his Master of Fine Arts degree from UCLA. The film portrays the state of Watts and neighboring

⁴³ Bill Nichols offers this assessment of the function of observational documentary techniques:

The presence of the camera "on the scene" testifies to its presence in the historical world. This affirms a sense of commitment or engagement with the immediate, intimate, and personal as it occurs. This also affirms a sense of fidelity to what occurs that can pass on events to us as they simply happened when they have, in fact, been constructed to have that very appearance. (113)

regions nearly a decade after the Revolt. The previous chapter pointed to the findings of the McCone Commission as an official account of the Watts Revolt that did not consider the residents' perspectives. The first initiatives for recovery had not been pursued and little had been done for economic improvement at that point. Social scientists from UCLA and the University of Southern California (USC) also surveyed the physical aftermath of Watts to gather data that would determine the best course of action to revive the region. Collectively, their most significant assessment was what they noted of the residents' behavioral patterns as opposed to systemic patterns that could be dismantled through policy making. These descriptions would contribute to what Horne refers to as "ghetto pathologies" (334). Horne pays close attention to how social scientists David Sears from UCLA and John McConahay from Yale University analyze the responses of black South Los Angeles residents. Sears and McConahay pointed out some distinctions about people who were most active in the revolt:

First, the riot was not the product of a small handful of the ghetto's residents. A majority was involved in at least the bystander activity of joining the crowds that followed the rioters in the streets. Second, the major distinguishing characteristics of the rioters were not poverty, recent migrancy, unemployment, or poor education—but youth. In fact, the participants represented a major portion of the young men and women in the ghetto. (Sears and McConahay 19)

Horne positions their point alongside the fact that younger residents had sympathetic attitudes towards the revolt. As the previous chapter revealed about conflicting accounts of the aftermath, this specific point magnifies how the presumption of racial tolerance

among whites neglects the racial and economic isolation of the inhabitants of South Los Angeles, including the working-class men.

Elected officials and organization leaders suggested establishing vocational training opportunities as the best strategy for recovery even though plants and factories were leaving the region. Burnett offers his personal observations:

It is a serious problem, a very serious problem which L.A. Government officials refuse to address. There've been recommendations after the Watts riots which still have not been implemented. Since 1964 or 1965 ...there have been two reports done on a national scale and about the riots, and then, there has been one done locally. That in itself shows you lack the interest and concern which certain political structures have for certain people. (Hozic 473)

The abandonment of the region would give way to increasing class disparities among black residents and shifting patterns in the demographic and in social activism. Prior to the Watts Revolt and throughout its course, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the National Urban League in Los Angeles were accused of protecting only the black middle class from the violence that emerged from the revolt and of centralizing them in their recovery efforts. The US Organization and the Los Angeles chapter of the Black Panther Party were polar opposites of the NAACP in terms of their target demographic and strategies for activism. As discussed in the previous chapter, there was a strong clash between US's cultural nationalist approach and the Black Panther Party's revolutionary nationalist strategy in determining the most effective way to recover from the Watts Revolt. Each of these platforms presented comparable yet competing ideas that manifested into conflicting

ideas of self-identity and self-determination as a man. Horne points out the crux of the conflict was Karenga's criticism of the Black Panther Party's alliances with predominantly white organizations, while the BPP ironically accused Karenga of recruiting gangsters, given how they discuss their relationship with the lumpenproletariat (201).⁴⁴

While both organizations conflicted vigorously about which of them had the most effective strategy to revive the region, the NAACP struggled to build a strong constituency in South Los Angeles. Horne asserts that the NAACP's stress on court action over mass action and overall insularity decreased their accessibility to the working poor. He added that the local residents' disinterest in mass action resulted in weak membership and a scarce funding base for these organizations.

The neglected appearance of Watts and neighboring regions is the outcome of failed initiatives never followed through by federal, state, and local governmental bodies. Cynthia Young describes Watts as an "internal colony" because of its geographical and economic isolation from the rest of the city. She points to the residents' emotional fatigue from living in survival mode: "This critical difference means that Burnett's film gestures toward the larger global dynamics that shape Watts, but ultimately his characters are too preoccupied with daily survival to seek or see such connections" (Young 234). The term "internal colony" also characterizes Stan's personal difficulties in making sense of his emotional isolation, which mirrors Young's description of Watts. His inability to

⁴⁴ Scot Brown adds that the Black Panther Party would use Karenga's academic credentials to discredit his ability to understand the lives of black residents throughout South Los Angeles, largely because US denounced any embodiment of street vernacular through language and fashion. He states, "The US Organization's internal culture discouraged behaviors and mannerisms attributed to 'street life,' and inspired a common fascination with education out of emulation of its leader. There was a general perception among US advocates that elements in the party celebrated a lifestyle unfit for revolutionaries" (113).

communicate his problem to his family and friends confirms his struggle to comprehend what is happening to him.

Stan's exhausted state is a response to the historical patterns persistent among black men throughout Los Angeles between the migration out West and the Watts Revolt. The isolation of black residents in islands throughout South Los Angeles was the result of ongoing discriminatory practices in the real estate industry and distribution of federal assistance. Black residents who aspired to purchase homes were subjected to tactics that included redistricting, policy changes, and hostile demonstrations against integrated neighborhoods. Burnett elaborates about these practices:

There was this exposé about banks not lending money to black people who certainly qualify for the loans; these institutions help create these all-white areas, these black islands, and they wonder, "Why? What's the problem with these people?" Because people in L.A. have this weird illusion that they are isolated and sheltered until there is a disruption such as the riots. (Hozic 473)

The practices that Burnett describes tie to earlier patterns found at the point where the migrants arrived during World War II. Efforts by law practitioners and legal activists such as Loren Miller and members of the NAACP Legal Counsel helped alter the policy-making decisions to make home ownership more accessible to African Americans. Miller was best known for his work with the NAACP Legal Defense Fund in the *Shelly v. Kramer* case. The latter was a convergence of three different cases challenging restrictive covenants in White-populated neighborhoods in Missouri, Michigan, and Washington D.C. Miller worked alongside Thurgood Marshall to argue against the constitutional validity of the covenants and their long-term outcomes that would alter the

physical and economic concentration of racial and ethnic communities. The U.S. Supreme Court decided in 1948 that such restrictive policies could not be enforced (Sides 100).⁴⁵ The NAACP Legal Counsel's activism would reduce animosity residents received from whites in neighborhoods where blacks sought to purchase homes. The opportunity to build wealth through purchasing a home would directly affect how black working-class men were beginning to shape their ideas of responsible and compassionate masculinity. The men in the region who would have been blue-collar workers in a previous generation now wanted to obtain an abundance of material possessions with minimal responsibilities.

Killer of Sheep also points to competing expressions of masculine identity along class lines. Middle-income black residents created their own enclave of homes along the borders of South Los Angeles. As Paul Robinson describes:

Throughout the 1960s, some blacks again removed themselves (temporarily at least) from the expanding ghetto by moving farther west into West Adams and Baldwin Hills.... The changes in the geographic character of class within the black communities of Los Angeles during these years left many black Angelenos attempting to cling to their regional identities that were increasingly less valid.

(44)

Many others, because of scarce wages and unreliable access to transportation, did not find an abundance of options. The basis of men's self-identity and self-determination often relied on the ability to support one's family and access to material assets that signified wealth, such as a home and a car. Robinson adds:

⁴⁵ Loren Miller was also known for his columns in the *Los Angeles Sentinel*. He was invited by his cousin Leon Washington, the paper's editor, to become a regular columnist. He is noted for breaking news about the Zoot Suit Riots in Los Angeles in 1943.

The mixing of social economic status that geographic proximity brought about was especially difficult for youth. As the 1970s and 1980s progressed, interneighborhood conflict between youth became more and more of a problem in the predominantly black portions of Los Angeles regardless of the social-class standing of the participants. (46)

By the 1970s, there was an increasing black middle-class isolation shown geographically in the region of Baldwin Hills/Windsor Hills/View Park/Ladera Heights.⁴⁶

The generational disagreements over effective strategies between the older members of the NAACP and the younger members of both US and the Black Panther Party also persisted through the lives of black working-class men. The absorption of Stan's emotional state reveals a failure of expectations created during his childhood that persists through his adulthood. The period from the arrival of Southern migrants in South Los Angeles in World War II through the mid-1960s magnifies how these expectations contribute to Stan's internal conflict. The region's economic shifts, particularly the decline of living-wage jobs and the decrease of opportunities to own homes, inform Stan's job as a slaughterhouse worker and the meager pay he earns.

The conflicting values between older and younger residents in *Killer of Sheep* reflect the different responses to racial antagonism towards black Angelenos. Black migrants from the Southeastern United States moved to the southern part of the city for two reasons. They sought refuge from Jim Crow policies and practices, and they also wanted to take advantage of defense jobs that were available after President Roosevelt

⁴⁶ Robinson points to how class disparities created internal conflicts among neighborhood youth. One example he uses is the death of Robert Ballou, the son of a lawyer who resided in the Westside section of Los Angeles. His death in 1972 at a Soul Train concert at the Hollywood Palladium intensified relations between the black professional class and youth on the "other side" (46).

implemented Executive Order 8802, which would ban discriminatory hiring practices from defense plants. While their new surroundings were a relative improvement, the migrants faced exclusion from white-populated neighborhoods and regions with upper middle-class black families. Employers would also concentrate blacks in low-paying occupations and jobs at the bottom of the seniority hierarchy.⁴⁷ After some years migrants were often able to purchase homes and cars with their earnings in spite of these obstacles, which was a relative improvement to what they could possess in the South. Jeff Chang points to the arrival of southern migrants to pursue increasingly available jobs in the shipyards and the aircraft and rubber industries. He adds that other needs had to be attended as these employment opportunities became available:

Now African-American neighborhoods, especially Watts—which had become the center of Black Los Angeles—were overwhelmed with demands for health care, schooling, transportation, and most of all, housing. Racial discrimination kept rents artificially high, and led to overcrowding as slumlords exploited poor families, who often joined together to split a monthly bill. (Chang 308)

Chang ties this geographic concentration to the increase of residents outpacing available space in housing projects such as Nickerson Gardens, Jordan Downs, Imperial Courts, and Hacienda Village. The stark economic conditions of these housing projects would become permanent after the failure to recover from a post-World War II recession.

⁴⁷ Sides explains:

Despite initial optimism among African Americans that they too would share in this prosperity, it quickly became clear that access to this new standard of blue-collar life was determined by numerous factors, many of which were beyond their control. First, and most universally, industrial employers and managers played a critical role in the pace and tone of industrial desegregation. Most engaged in racially discriminatory hiring and promotion practices, even as they actively recruited black workers to replace white workers who were eager to find lighter, cleaner, and better paying work. (59)

At least two decades prior to the Watts Revolt, black men were employed in entry-level positions at plants and shipyards with little or no opportunity for union membership or seniority. Many of these situations were illustrated in Chester Himes's novels about Los Angeles during this period (*If He Hollers Let Him Go*, 1945; *Lonely Crusade*, 1947). Few black migrants had supervisory positions or equal pay to their white counterparts; yet even with only minimal education they were able to find jobs to earn them a relatively comfortable life. As Burnett recalls:

People could work and survive without having had a college education, you could work as a mechanic—cars were simple enough where you can learn from your father and so forth. And now, if you don't have any kind of education at all, you can't beat that. It's just more difficult a person to survive. So you look at all that and you see where things are going and it's very tragic. (Smith, "A Quiet Storm")

Working-class and professional middle-class black residents also lived in the same areas in South Los Angeles that included Baldwin Hills, Leimert Park, and Compton, a white-populated working-class suburb that underwent a tremendous demographic shift. Josh Sides observes the multiracial makeup of residents, schools, and associations in these neighborhoods. There was nevertheless a substantive presence of black residents who interacted with others to prevent racial clashes. Yet tensions arose between middle-class blacks who saw their transition into another neighborhood as taking advantage of a major opportunity and lower-income residents who thought their move was an act of betrayal (Sides 192).

***Killer of Sheep* and the Pathology of the Black Family in Urban America**

During the 1960s, the official accounts of the federal government on the black family structure in America magnify its misidentified perceptions about how the unit functions, whether run by one or two parents. These perceptions are a major obstacle that *Killer of Sheep* chronicles, as it follows a black working-class man's attempt to express his self-identity and sense of self-determination. The Moynihan Report is a landmark example of how the construction and presentation of a black masculine identity is pursued without any agency from black men. The report does not consider other models of black masculinity other than a physically absent or a present yet emotionally emasculated figure who cannot offer any tangible support. Moynihan argues that the pathology of black single motherhood has not only destroyed the black family, but it has rendered black men obsolete.⁴⁸

Daniel Patrick Moynihan released a report from the Department of Labor that analyzed the makeup of black families in urban regions in the 1960s during the Johnson Administration. Titled "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action," it references historical information to determine how oppressive actions towards African Americans had contributed to the contemporary family structure. Moynihan contemplates the shifts of the black family throughout history:

With the emancipation of the slaves, the Negro American family began to form in the United States on a widespread scale. But it did so in an atmosphere markedly

⁴⁸ Pathology was a term frequently used to describe black families in urban areas in books such as *Dark Ghetto* by Kenneth Clark (1965), *Black Rage* by William H. Grier and Price M. Cobbs (1968), and Moynihan's report for the Department of Labor. In his essay "White Norms for Black Deviation," Albert Murray criticizes the premise behind these studies: "Unfortunately, it seems that spokesmen, like most other Americans, have been conditioned by school systems and communications media that have overpromoted the methodology and the categories of social science at the expense of the more comprehensive wisdom of the humanities and the arts—leaving thereby their sense of context deficient" (*The Omni-Americans* 44).

different from that which has produced the white American family. The Negro was given liberty, but not equality. Life remained hazardous and marginal. Of the greatest importance, the Negro male, particularly in the South, became an object of intense hostility, an attitude unquestionably based in some measures of fear. (Moynihan)

The historical information found in this passage serves as the basis for Moynihan's lengthy and thorough analysis of the black family in America. His conclusive remarks, however, contradict his explanation of how structural and deliberate racism driven by inequality contributes to the black family structure. Moynihan portrays the black family with an absent father as the source for ethical and moral problems that affect a vast portion of the black community. He places the matriarch-run household as a phenomenon that contributes to an environment harmful for child-rearing, particularly in African American families. One particular example he offers is a family in Cook County, IL where the mother is the sole parent. Her aid from AFDC is the sole financial support for her children because the father is not at home (Moynihan). Moynihan also points to the disproportionate number of women with a formal education in comparison to men, which grants women access to white collar and professional jobs that the men do not have (Moynihan).

Burnett presents a two-parent household in *Killer of Sheep* that counters Moynihan's portrait of the urban black family in the mid-1960s. The marriage at the center of the film can be read as a direct response to the following passage from Moynihan:

The matriarchal pattern of so many Negro families reinforces itself over the

generations. This process begins with education. Although the gap appears to be closing at the moment, for a long while, Negro females were better educated than Negro males.... In 1 out of 4 Negro families where the father is present, is an earner, and someone in the family works, the husband is not the principal earner.

The comparable figure for whites is 18 percent. (Moynihan)

Stan in *Killer of Sheep* is a useful character to contrast with the general presentation of black men in Moynihan's document. He is the principal earner of his family who nevertheless struggles to be a caring partner and an effective parent. The film challenges the conventional wisdom of the Moynihan report that black men who live with their families are inevitably emasculated by the wife's presence. Burnett provides a context that acknowledges the complex dynamics between Stan and his wife. It shows a black woman concerned about what bothers her husband rather than seeking to dominate him or characterize him as an obstacle to her personal fulfillment. Later, the chapter will discuss their struggles to achieve sexual consummation, the only kind of personal fulfillment Stan's wife pursues. He establishes the nature of Stan's line of work as a factor that depletes a lot of energy that he needs to communicate effectively to his wife and children. It can be argued that Moynihan's assessment reinforces the notion of black-populated urban areas as internal colonies because the document offers no clear solutions to the problems it identifies. Young argues that *Killer of Sheep* "suggests a critique of a U.S. nation-state has also been subdued, if not destroyed" (240). The portrayal of Stan's relationship with his family and neighbors humanizes the black working poor, as it presents the catalysts and entrapping structures that amplify poverty and unemployment.

***Killer of Sheep* and Contemporary Presentations of Black Masculine Identity in the 1970s**

With *Killer of Sheep*, Burnett offers a model for a film form that centralizes African-American subjects and themes outside of the parameters of the American studio system. The narrative structure unravels the complexities beneath a male character's sense of self-identity and self-determination. These catalysts range from discouraging neighbors and disconnected spouses to unbearable work conditions and an overall decline of the region that disrupts one's sense of confidence. Burnett's assessment of commercial cinema demonstrates continuity from his years as a university student to his career as a veteran independent filmmaker:

The commercial film is largely responsible for affecting how one views the world. It reduced the world to one dimension, rendering taboos to superstition, concentrated on the ugly, creating confusion rather than offering clarity: to sum it up, it was demoralizing. It took years for commercial films to help condition society on how it should respond to reality. (224)

Burnett points to consistent practices of commercial American cinema that are internalized and permeated throughout American popular culture in this passage. Blaxploitation action films with a predominantly black cast were the most heavily circulated images of black men as heroic protagonists while Burnett was making *Killer of Sheep*. These products of a genre embodied a conventional narrative structure found in mainstream action and comedy movies that incorporated popular music and fashion of

that period. The films resembled each other so closely that black audiences would cultivate a uniform set of expectations for each one.

The genre's popularity traces back to Melvin Van Peebles's *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971), a film he made outside of the Hollywood industry. The film follows a resident sex performer at a brothel on the run from law enforcement after he beats two police officers to save a neighborhood activist from an attack while in police custody. Tommy Lott argues that the film was a major success because "it captured an image of self-defense that gave on-screen legitimation to violent retaliation against racist police brutality" (43). *Sweetback* was noted for its filmmaking style that referenced modernist European cinema and experimental cinema with its use of jump cuts, negative imaging, and handheld camerawork. The major Hollywood studios followed suit with releases of black-themed films that would feature black male protagonists, for example, *Shaft* (1971) by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer starring Richard Roundtree as the title character, a private investigator hired to find a gangster's daughter,; or Warner Bros. Pictures' *Superfly* (1972 starring Ron O'Neal as Priest, a drug dealer looking to make a final sale before leaving the drug trade. Black audiences accustomed to commercial American cinema were fond of these characters' charismatic presences and their heroic qualities in spite of working within the fringes of the law. These male protagonists were often fighting white authority figures within both law enforcement and organized crime without disrupting the power structure. Although each film had a black male hero, the power structure within both organizations reinforced racial subordination that privileged its gatekeepers.

The basis of criticism towards blaxploitation films was the presumed superficiality of how the male protagonists were presented and the objectives they pursued. John Shaft, Priest, and similar central protagonists served as spectacles in action sequences and love scenes, but they were nevertheless unable to disrupt the power structure. An observation of the potential references to blaxploitation in *Killer of Sheep* will be discussed later in the chapter. One example from *Killer of Sheep* of two men who propose that Stan take part in a murder is the closest correspondence with the stock male characters of blaxploitation movies. The characters magnify the spectacle of violence as a sign of danger rather than an entry into vicariousness.

The presence of black-populated urban spaces is the main commonality that the films of the L.A. Rebellion share with the blaxploitation era. Burnett and his colleagues focus on an increasing sense of apathy among residents and their desperate attempts to improve their quality of living instead of interactions with organized crime and corrupt law enforcement officers. Haile Gerima's *Bush Mama* (1975), Larry Clark's *Passing Through* (1977), and Billy Woodberry's *Bless Their Little Hearts* (1984) use South Los Angeles as a site of contemporary black masculine identities in which characters struggle to obtain a sense of self-determination. The pursuit of these qualities involves developing strategies to sustain their confidence. In *Bush Mama*, the character T.C. attempts to construct a black male militant identity while incarcerated through the black revolutionary literature of the 1960s and '70s; in *Passing Through*, Warmack gathers his fellow musicians to fight the corrupt practices of the recording industry; and in *Bless Their Little Hearts*, Charlie struggles with finding consistent employment that instills

dignity. These characters share with Stan an urgency to obtain self-identity and self-determination to fight through physical, psychological, and economic confinement.

Killer of Sheep's mise-en-scène contributes to revealing the process by which black masculinities are constructed and dismantled within a spatial cinematic narrative. Like Burnett, the L.A. Rebellion felt that the blaxploitation movie and other studio-funded projects designed to attract black audiences presented characters as subordinates and commodities. The collective wanted to create a cinema that challenged and engaged black audiences to see itself onscreen in new ways. Their motivations fall in line with how Diawara describes the political motivations of independent filmmakers, a "[dissatisfaction] with commercial cinema's lack of courage to address certain issues" that inspires them to take action, and artistic motivations that reflect a desire to "experiment with the camera...and engage the infinite possibilities of storytelling" ("Black American Cinema" 6).

The stylistic choices in *Killer of Sheep* correspond with the films from the newsreel documentary movement of the 1960s and 1970s to depict a contemporary working-class masculine identity. New York Newsreel and Third World Newsreel were two outlets from this movement that shared a stylistic approach more indebted to avant-garde film production than the commercial news media they sought to conquer. These film organizations were dedicated to capturing the responses of forgotten individuals due to income earnings and racial or sexual identity. New York Newsreel wanted to use documentary as a tool for political organizing, while Third World Newsreel focused on the responses of communities of color on political and geographical matters in their

neighborhoods. Young offers the central distinction between New York Newsreel and Third World Newsreel:

The new name was meant to underscore the material imbalance between the white and the Third World caucus, a relationship in which the raw, manual labor was often supplied by the members of color without the economic resources and skills training possessed by the white members. The use of the term Third World stood as a commentary on the racist paternalism evident in [New York] Newsreel. (150)

Conventions found in Third Cinema documentaries were most ideal for Third World Newsreel because they wanted to cultivate a space for their subjects to participate in the production process, even if it went no further than appearing on camera.

Many of the strategies discussed by Fernando Solanas, Octavio Getino and Glauber Rocha are appropriated by Third World Newsreel to present the lives of people of color in diminished urban areas with a strong immediacy.⁴⁹ Young's assessment of Third World Newsreel's filmmaking objectives is consistent with Burnett's initial reasons for making *Killer of Sheep*. He made the film partly as a response to feelings towards the way his white counterparts at UCLA romanticized the working class in their films to a point where their detachment undermined the treatment of their subjects (Kim "Charles Burnett"). Burnett also wanted to include residents in the area to participate in the production. A later moment in the chapter will discuss his efforts to demystify the filmmaking process and offer a platform to dismantle the stereotypes assigned to black working-class men in South Los Angeles.

⁴⁹ The cinematic conventions found in New York and Third World Newsreel include handheld cameras, dubbed sound, location shooting, and black-and-white reversal film stock.

The film's use of spatial narration and its episodic narrative structure contains intercutting between episodes of adults and children to identify cyclical patterns of hyper-aggression and its consequences. Its episodic narrative structure enables the characters to respond to an arrangement of space that mirrors the incorporation of assemblage by black visual artists who sought to convey how black working-class men adapt to life after the Watts Revolt.⁵⁰ As Daniel Widener describes:

Assemblages transformed the familiar, forcing new looks on old objects. In a neighborhood surrounded by junkyards and plagued by infrequent garbage collection, junk art asked the community to reexamine the true value of the objects around it. Whether one used hair (Hammons), riot debris ([Noah] Purifoy and [Judson] Powell), or rags and steel ([Melvin] Edwards, [John] Outterbridge, and [John] Riddle), assemblage offers the possibility of creating images familiar to black audiences without constraints of pure realism. (164)

Widener's description of assemblage resembles Burnett's progression of a character through multiple episodes in *Killer of Sheep*. He places songs intermittently from an older generation throughout the film to construct a cultural memory that haunts younger characters desperately wanting to abandon their immediate past. Songs like those performed by Paul Robeson ("Lullaby," "The House I Live In") and Dinah Washington ("This Bitter Earth") thread specific scenes throughout the film. The songs stubbornly remind the characters of older memories they have tried to discard and function as a part of Burnett's larger commitment to preserving past traditions in his narratives:

⁵⁰ Specific artworks from black male artists of this period range from oil paintings by William Alexander and watercolors by Bill Pajaud to sculptures by William Blackman and mixed-media art by John Outterbridge and David Hammons, many of whom were from working-class environments (Widener 82).

I think that it is the artist's job to establish links with the past, to give some self-respect to the people to create the sense of a center. I think that erosion of memory is the design of the establishment. . . . Hollywood insists on perpetuating these myths about blacks, dangerous myths, and this is going to destroy black people. I think that these are their means. Without history, you are nothing. Memory is like coming on an island, something to catch and hang onto. I think we have to create the past—no, not to create, to define the past. (Hozic 475)

Residents make little effort to create an intergenerational space in their lives because they are overwhelmingly preoccupied with day-to-day survival, as Young noted earlier. The spatial arrangement found in *Killer of Sheep* enables this space to bridge the increasing gap between Stan's generation, his children, and the memories of his elders.

The Reconciliation of Cultural Memory within a Contemporary Masculine Identity in *Killer of Sheep*

Killer of Sheep uses Diawara's idea of spatial narration to construct an episodic-based narrative arrangement that includes the execution of long takes and long shots and music from a prior generation. The filmmaker merges these dynamics in four distinct spaces to foreground Stan's internal struggle, his interactions with his family and friends, and the state of the region as reflected through children's actions. The source of Stan's anguish comes from his job working at a slaughterhouse. Stan is shown in reverse order taking care of his work responsibilities. He is first shown at work cleaning the equipment used to slaughter the sheep. He washes his hands and leaves the facility afterwards. The next series of shots at the slaughterhouse shows Stan pushing the sheep parts in a

wheelbarrow. The following series capture Stan him gathering the hooks to hang the dead sheep and skin them, and it concludes with a shot of him herding the sheep into the facility. Burnett uses a handheld camera to capture Stan and his co-workers conducting their duties. These images are shot from an observational standpoint to offer a breakdown of how Stan's day is segmented. Stan's facial expressions show more of a focus on the task he is given than the distress shown on his face through most of the film. The dehumanizing nature of the work reflects Stan's subconscious internalization of this systematic routine. The sequence also reveals the residual opportunities that remain in South Los Angeles after many factories and plants have evacuated the area by this time. Insomnia deters him from intimately engaging with his family and making lucid decisions with their best interests in mind.

Stan's home is a space where his friends and neighbors stop by to either provide support or inadvertently offer discouragement. An adult Stan first appears onscreen with his upper body underneath a sink in a wide shot that Burnett arranges. He confides to his friend, Oscar, his struggle to gain a peace of mind. When Oscar suggests that he commit suicide, Stan slowly rejects his idea when the sight of his daughter wearing a dog mask is a reminder of how his children are dependent upon him. Oscar follows by asking the last time Stan attended church, to which he responds not since he and his family arrived in Los Angeles. Burnett shifts between the wide shot and a medium shot of his daughter wearing her mask throughout the scene. Stan Jr. intrudes in the shot of the daughter and aggressively asks where his BB gun is. Stan tries to tell his son to leave his sister alone, and he does not remove himself from the wide shot until he grabs a dish rag to hit Stan Jr.

His son's dash out of the house marks a transition from Oscar to Bracy. Stan talks with Bracy over a cup of coffee at the kitchen table. At one point Stan places the mug across his cheek and asks Bracy if it reminds him how a woman feels at the start of making love. Bracy responds by comparing the hot mug to the body temperature of women with malaria and laughs uproariously. Stan is noticeably discouraged. His wife appears behind Bracy fresh out of the shower with a robe and a towel over her head. Bracy whistles when she appears while Stan barely responds.

The recently described scene establishes three central problems Stan faces. His exchanges with Oscar and Bracy show an increasing distress that he cannot articulate to his family and friends. Stan's muted response to his wife fresh out of the shower reveals his troubles as a compassionate romantic partner. His inability to get his son to respond to his orders also shows his challenges being an effective father. Each of these problems further amplifies Stan's distress in that he knows neither how to understand the pain he experiences nor how to convey his frustrations to his family and friends.

These problems also contribute to misguided decisions Stan makes to improve his family's financial well-being. Both instances show men attempt a heart-to-heart conversation that leaves Stan in a greater sense of discouragement. The kitchen table is a space where Stan has some of his most difficult moments in the film because of either his inability to convey emotion or his disclosure of passion and promise falls on deaf ears. Each instance further complicates his ability to establish a strong sense of self-identity and self-determination. Burnett's concentration on Stan, his family, and his neighborhood allows the film to extend beyond what Lott calls "biological essentialism" (88). Lott's call for a no-theory theory in contemporary black cinema points to how films

like *Killer of Sheep* barely received an audience outside of the art house, film festival, or art museum screening circuit because of their stylistic approach. Burnett departs from the classical Hollywood narrative because he finds that a more observational approach enables him to focus on the absence of compassion and concern in his characters' interactions.

In two moments where Stan attempts to increase his earnings, Burnett alternates long shots and long takes to chronicle his central character's process towards obtaining a car and winning money at a race track. One moment shows Stan and Gene sharing with Bracy their plans to purchase a motor for a car to gain a tangible sign of upward mobility. Bracy dismisses their plan as a misguided attempt to escape poverty. His discouraging response to Stan and Gene shows how the two men seek to adopt ambition as a characteristic of their masculine identities, yet the lack of support they receive threatens their desire to cultivate it. Stan takes Bracy's comments not only as a mockery of his present economic state, but also as a suggestion that he is failing at providing for his family. He goes so far as to tell Bracy and Gene that he donates to the Salvation Army, and that he has not resorted to the desperation of a neighborhood man whose only choice for food is to pick weeds out of a vacant lot.

Another part of Stan's and Gene's attempt to purchase a motor is that they must cash a check at a nearby liquor store. Their trip involves an exchange between Stan and the store's owner, a large white woman who is nice to Stan but unfriendly to a prior customer and the man who works for her. Her attempts to flirt with Stan reveal two details about him. It shows that Stan is simply not attracted to her and it reveals commitment and loyalty to his marriage as another characteristic of his masculine

identity. He responds to the owner's question about him working at the liquor store by stating that he is afraid to get caught in the middle of a hold-up. It is Stan's indirect way of expressing his commitment to his wife and his overall disinterest.

The next part of their process is when they arrive at the apartment of the man who possesses the motor. A challenge they each face is their ability to pay for the motor, to which an agreement is reached for fifteen dollars and Gene's shirt for collateral. Three men are shown in the apartment when Stan and Gene arrive. The gentleman from whom Stan and Gene are purchasing the motor is the most elaborately dressed in the scene. Vanity is a characteristic in his masculine identity because he spends the entire scene looking in the mirror. A younger man sits between him and a woman at a kitchen table. His high voice and the way he describes the attack of another man in the room suggests that he is the youngest among everyone. The nephew of the man who owns the car motor lies next to it. His head is bandaged as a result from the attack, and Stan and Gene assume that it is because he said something that made the perpetrators upset. He expresses an arrogance that conceals a sense of self-pity central to his masculine identity. It is a characteristic that the lone woman in the room criticizes. She also acknowledges the sense of distress Stan has, as she suggests that he would be more handsome if he did not frown so much. The man with the bandaged head seeks the same kind of attention when he asks her why the both of them never became romantic as she applies lotion to her legs. He undermines his attempt when he makes a sexual remark she finds crude. The increasing tension in their conversation culminates when he calls her an "all-day sucker bitch." She responds by kicking him in the head, prompting Stan and Gene to

restrain her. The young man's nephew ignores what is happening and pronounces that he "does not give a damn."

Burnett applies the long shot and the long take to capture multiple shots of them carrying the car motor once they obtain it. The sequence opens with a long take that features a close-up of the men struggling to bring the motor down some stairs. It alternates with a long shot that reveals the long flight of stairs they must climb down. Burnett shifts to a handheld camera to follow Stan and Gene loading the car motor on the truck. As they do so, it lands on Gene's fingers, which causes him so much pain that he declines Stan's suggestion to push the motor further back in the rear of the truck. As the men get into the truck and begin to drive off, the motor falls from the rear of the truck and crashes onto the ground. It cuts to close-ups of Stan and Gene rushing out of the truck and a close-up of the motor destroyed on the ground. Individual shots of Stan and Gene looking at the motor follow. The final shot of the scene returns to the shot of the truck departing abandoning the broken motor. The use of the long shot and the long take aligns with Gabriel's idea that the technique allows for a depiction of the action as if it were in real time. The presentation of Stan and Gene carrying the motor at the moment further magnifies the disappointment when it falls to the ground from the back of the truck. Stan and Gene's inability to accomplish their goal undermines ambition as a central characteristic of their masculine identity. Their failed endeavor also disrupts their confidence in improving the quality of life for each of their families.

Another moment finds Stan and Gene taking their families to the race track to place bets on a horse race. Burnett uses a single shot in two different scenes to capture their departure. He shows Bracy with Stan, Gene, and their families filing into the car on

the right side of the frame while neighborhood children race their bikes towards the camera on the left side. The following shot shows the car on the right side of the frame while the left side shows other cars passing by on the highway. Burnett shows everyone getting out of the car because a tire has gone flat. He shows close-ups of all of the passengers exiting while Bracy berates Gene for not having a spare tire. The action cuts back to the wide shot, and everyone climbs back in once Gene realizes he has no choice but to ride back home on the rim of the wheel. The moments with the car motor and the flat tire challenge Stan's level of ambition and motivation. He is forced to reconsider other options to improve his family's way of life. Burnett's cinematic approach reveals that Stan's greatest threat is a confinement to the situations his life imposes on him. It appears more unlikely that he can ever advance beyond working at a slaughterhouse, or living in a neighborhood where the threat of crime increases. His stagnant opportunities threaten to amplify his sense of anxiety and hopelessness. The framing and duration of the shot confirms Gabriel's idea that it amplifies the presence of onscreen action as if it is happening that very moment. The sight of everyone waiting outside of the car and then riding back home on the rim of the wheel illustrates the futility of Stan's efforts.

An earlier point of the film finds Stan facing a dilemma where he rejects the desire to harm other people for his personal gain; yet he does not make a very strong defense of his personal principles when he rejects an offer from two neighborhood men looking to murder someone. The scene begins with a wide shot that shows the luxury car Smoke and Scooter drive in as they approach Stan's home. Both men are dressed in leather jackets and elaborately patterned shirts to present a sharp contrast between their fashionable attire and Stan's tattered clothes in front of his home. It contextualizes

Smoke and Scooter's offer of an opportunity for Stan, in spite of the dangerous consequences it involves.

A seated Stan is framed between a standing Smoke and Scooter in a wide shot. Stan's wife listens to their attempts to make Stan an accomplice. She enters the scene, emerging from her front door and challenging both men about why they would resort to wanting to hurt someone. Scooter affirms that he has accepted the notion he must resort to violent confrontation to defend himself, to gain what he wants, and to affirm his identity as a man. He finishes by telling Stan to "be a man if you can." Stan's wife's dispute with their philosophy can be characterized as a battle between brutal aggression and the denouncement of violence. Stan sits behind his wife and both men as they argue the entire time.

This same space also highlights how symptomatic Stan is of his elders' attitude when he and his wife try to discipline their children. Angela and Stan Jr. enter the same space that Smoke and Scooter have departed and receive a scolding from each of their parents in a wide shot from a different angle. Stan's wife yells at their daughter to put a jacket on so that she does not catch a cold. Stan himself shouts down their son for calling his mother "Madea" because it reminds him of his childhood growing up in the rural South. The shift from the interaction with Smoke and Scooter to scolding their children also points to another way spatial narration is applied. The defense of a masculine identity that embraces the use of one's brain and a reliance on one's heart does not necessarily transfer to the way Stan and his wife parent their children.

Stan Jr. and his sister are addressed in a way that does not suggest nurturing. The exchange with their children contributes to an understanding of the larger reason why

children wander aimlessly throughout South Los Angeles. Stan's scolding of his son simultaneously rejects his southern rural identity while also showing an anxiety that they have not escaped it because he associates "Madea" with a Southern greeting used to address older women. Stan and his wife assert their authority as parents after their personal values and efforts towards survival have been imposed upon. Both are also inclined to distance themselves from their immediate Southern ancestry. Smoke and Scooter's argument with Stan's wife reflects a more substantive conflict between men and women. This scene is one of a few instances in which there are parallels of gender conflict between children and adults. An earlier moment in the film points to how boys adopt aggressive behavior and objectification of women as characteristics of masculine identity to embody. When one boy suggests they watch prostitutes walk in and out of a brothel, another boy objects because he worries his mother will physically discipline him if she finds out. The idea of watching prostitutes shows a genuine curiosity of female sexuality, but it ultimately morphs into a desire to objectify and dominate women.

The boys have internalized an impulse to objectify women in the same way that older men have. Two subsequent scenes in the film exemplify how their aggressive horseplay among each other produces an impulse to objectify and dominate women, a source of conflict between boys and girls. One scene follows a boy attempting to ride his bike through an alley occupied by girls playing double-dutch. The boy shoves the weakest girl to the ground when her friends refuse to move upon his demanding request. The girls retaliate by shoving him off of his bike, forcing him to run away and threaten to tell his mother. Burnett captures this action in a long take to demonstrate the consequences of asserting a dominating form of masculinity to subjugate women. The

boy's posturing unravels a great deal of insecurity once the girls shove him off of the bike. A friend of Stan Jr.'s expresses a similar sentiment towards girls when he tries to taunt two of them walking down the street. He calls them ugly from afar, yet he cannot keep track of how long his friends can hold a handstand. He threatens to fight the girls when they retort, "Your daddy!" Burnett uses a long shot to show the vast distance that grants the boy a safe position from which to express his aggression.

Two scenes serve as examples of wide shots within long takes that project two similar conflicts between men and women: a man who attempts to scold his sassy female companion outside the liquor store where Stan wants to cash a check, and a Vietnam veteran who tries to avoid being shot by the mother of his children. The former scene consists of two close-up shots of a woman's feet. She struts to the car to meet other men in the liquor store parking lot. Her verbal exchange with a man who calls her a "no-good woman" is presented as off-camera dialogue. Neither of them is shown speaking directly to each other. The latter scene captures the Vietnam veteran running up and down the stairs at the apartment of where the mother of his children lives. The medium shot of the veteran is intercut with wide shots of onlookers, and the action cuts to a close-up of the woman pointing the gun. Burnett expands Diawara's concept of spatial narration by paralleling the way children internalize a similar contention as the adults. This level of tension between boys and girls is increased further when women use weapons to protect their children from men.

Gender conflicts among children and adults in *Killer of Sheep* are fueled by a hyper-aggression among men. Hyper-aggression is a characteristic that suggests a sense of a dominant masculine identity; yet its embrace can lead to a consequential response.

Boys speak to girls in a tone similar to how they would speak to each other, except the energy the boys use when they engage in roughhousing with each other is used towards girls in a vicious manner. A transitional scene shows a group of boys ambushing a girl with clods of dirt as she hangs up laundry along a clothes line. Even in their own spaces boys cannot show emotional vulnerability in the face of pain because it shows a weak masculine identity. One boy is shown in the opening scenes nursing a wound that causes his friends to stop what they are doing. They immediately resume playing when they realize the boy is faking. Burnett covers the action in each of these scenes by alternating between a wide shot of the subjects involved and a close-up to capture the reaction.

The sequences that show aggressive roughhousing among boys are followed by scenes of adult men who seek to earn quick money through theft or harming someone else. Stan Jr. walks home to get his BB gun shortly after one of his friends pretends that he is hurt. On the way, he sees two men carrying a television set down the street, one of whom threatens an older man who can see them from his home. Stan Jr. informs the thieves that the old man is going to call the police, so one of the thieves sets the television set down to grab a stick and head over to the man's house to beat him. His partner restrains him and they hurriedly carry the television set down the street to avoid the police if they arrive. Burnett uses wide shots to depict what takes place and close-ups to display the characters' reactions to one another. Stan Jr. and the thieves are placed in the same *mise-en-scène* to illustrate what can happen if the boys' level of aggression allows them to justify taking other people's property and harming anyone who stands in their way. They exhibit a masculine identity that thrives on violence as a means of survival similar to Smoke and Scooter. The television thief who threatens to attack the old man

might justify his intensity as necessary for survival, but it also serves as a response to the failed efforts of any economic, social, or cultural revival. Smoke and Scooter represent the dangerous levels to which the aggression, such as that expressed by the television thieves, can elevate.

One failure of policy makers and people responsible for the recovery of Watts was that they could not find industries to replace the ones departing. This contributed to the loss of resources for a younger generation and was a catalyst for cultivating a false sense of self-identity and self-determination that thrives on dominating others. The boys play in the abandoned spaces while Robeson's "That's America to Me" is heard in conjunction with the image. As the song accompanies an image of the boys pretending to perform manual labor, it references the absence of jobs that plants and factories once provided. An image of a strip of destroyed businesses for residents to shop also reflects the region's weak economic infrastructure. What this reveals about the construction and presentation of black working-class masculinity is that there is no reliable source for living-wage employment to give black working-class men a sense of confidence that they could provide for their families and contribute to their communities.

The kitchen table and living room function as central spaces that unveil Stan's troubled relationship with his wife and his blind spots as a romantic partner. These sites remind Stan of the urgency he lacks to protect his family, a characteristic of a masculine identity that he still fears he has not obtained. The kitchen table is where Stan's wife shares her observations of his insomnia. She and her husband are shown in a close-up shot that shows her making a conscious appeal for him to try to sleep. It cuts to a wide shot of the two at the kitchen table. Stan steps away and resumes to working on applying

new linoleum to the kitchen floor. The kitchen table becomes a site of disclosure later in the film when Stan speaks to his wife for the first time. Burnett captures the couple in a two-shot close-up when he expresses his displeasure about his job to her. Even more surprising is when Stan asks his wife about her day. She is so shocked by this gesture that she does not respond. His wife sees it as an opportunity to become intimate with him when she suggests they go to bed because tomorrow is Saturday. Stan attends to his daughter who also craves his attention. His wife becomes so frustrated that she storms out of the kitchen and into the living room. Burnett cuts between Stan and his daughter and his wife's angry gaze from the living room couch to reveal how Stan's increasing attentiveness towards his partner does not ultimately result in sexual consummation. The moment reveals a limitation in which Stan is able to embody a masculine identity that includes compassion towards his daughter, but not intimacy towards his wife.

A prior scene in the living room also exemplifies Stan and his wife's dormant intimacy. The uninterrupted take frames shirtless Stan and his wife as they dance to Dinah Washington's "This Bitter Earth" with opposite responses to each other's body language. Stan appears frozen while his wife rubs against his body with increasing passion. She continues to grasp onto his body shortly after the song ends until he walks out of the frame. She grasps onto the window behind her out of excessive frustration as her passions become obviously unfulfilled. The living room is as much a site for unconsummated sensuality as it is as a site for resuscitated passion. Stan and his wife sit on the couch shortly after they return from a failed trip to the race track. He takes advantage of a rare moment they spend alone when he softly touches her knee. It is the rare moment in the film where they exchange smiles with one another. Their exchange

also unveils Stan's increasing self-confidence that grants him the ability to become affectionate with his wife. Stan's sentiments embody a characteristic of masculinity that aligns intimacy with his ability protect and provide for his family. Gabriel's assessment of the long take involves moving the pace of the narrative more leisurely to "[approximate] the viewer's sense of time and rhythm of life" ("Towards a Critical Theory of Third World Films 44-45). Burnett uses the long take as an observational point more concerned with the polarizing responses from each spouse that illustrates Stan's emotional distance from his wife.

The opportunities that Stan rejects (with Smoke and Scooter) and pursues (with Gene) point to the limited opportunities black working-class men in South Los Angeles have to improve their personal economic situation. These scenes are intercut with boys playing in abandoned spaces throughout the neighborhood. The boys play in a frolicsome manner that contrasts the depressed mannerisms of adult males. The shift between these subjects suggests that the youth are likely to become imprisoned or remain in a cycle of low-wage employment. As Bishetta Merritt observes:

The children jump off roofs, throw rocks, ride their bikes, jump rope, and engineer battles on streets full of abandoned cars, vacant dusty lots, and tall apartment buildings. These innocent children seem oblivious to the squalor and poverty around them or of the challenges that await them once they mature and venture outside of this unkempt environment. (113)

The scenes that precede or succeeds shots of the boys playing throughout the neighborhood suggests their inevitable outcome if they continue to internalize the attitudes of their parents.

Stan's problematic relationship with his immediate ancestral past in the rural South is introduced in the film's opening scene. The first shot shows Stan as a child being chastised by his father for not protecting his brother in a fight. The camera begins with a close-up of his eyes and they zoom out to show his entire face until it cuts to a close-up of his father scolding him. He emphasizes to Stan that the ability to protect loved ones with urgency is a necessary characteristic of one's masculine identity when he stresses the importance of taking care of his brother. Stan's father gravely reinforces his sentiments when he tells his son, "You are not a child anymore. You soon will be a goddamn man. Start learning what life is about." His aggressive yet instructive explanation of these consequences is dwarfed when Stan's mother slaps him. A quick edit shows Stan's mother's hand strike his face and his reaction to it. The final shot of the scene is Stan's response to his mother when he directs a slow scornful gaze towards her.

This moment serves as a source of trauma for Stan because it reminds him of the ability to protect as a characteristic of a masculine identity he fears he does not possess. The presentation of Stan's relationship with his past offers a different dynamic from Diawara's and Gabriel's analysis on the way a film engages with history. Both scholars contend that the design of narrative structures and the use of cinematic techniques in a context outside of mainstream American cinema offer a liberating treatment of history that is not confined to an official presentation. Burnett's episodic narrative structure allows for a shift from the past to the present that emphasizes why Stan's life demands a more personal liberation from the trauma of his past. The opening scene and subsequent

scenes not only illustrate what Stan's memory of the past looks like, but also point to how he recognizes his personal past in his everyday life.

Resiliency emerges as a central characteristic for Stan's self-identity and self-determination that symbolizes the realities of black working-class men in South Los Angeles. Burnett's attempt to directly involve residents in the film's production was intended to expose them to how the filmmaking process works. They would gain knowledge and an agency to become potential producers instead of passive spectators and consumers. Their participation enabled them to learn storytelling through a cinematic framework. Burnett used his stylistic approach towards making the film to establish an authorial distance between his subjects. This approach was necessary for him to effectively adapt their realities to a fictional context, a strategy appropriated from his work with British documentarian Basil Wright.

Community residents were recruited to work as cast and crew members in an effort to demystify filmmaking for people unaware of how films are made. Burnett's purpose was to spotlight the community as a model for resiliency. *Killer of Sheep* moves black working-class men from a marginal to a central presence before the camera and behind the scenes. The presence of residents from Watts in the film pushes through the conventional notion of positive images projected by social critics. A major caveat about promoting positive images is that they are relegating a reality to a point where it is non-existent. Developing "positive images" of black people onscreen was not the focus of Burnett's strategies in *Killer of Sheep* and his previous films. His suspicions towards them emerge from his concerns of the way spectators respond to cinematic presentation. Robert Stam and Louise Spence offer a caveat about positive images that reinforces

Burnett's contemplative approach to constructing an episodic narrative structure: "A cinema dominated by positive images, characterized by bending-over-backwards-not-to-be-racist-attitude, might ultimately betray a lack of confidence in the group portrayed, which usually itself has no illusions concerning its own projection" (883). Their criticism about positive images also points to the danger of producing a model of masculinity based on unrealistic precedents.

While Burnett is right to point out the obstacles that keep his black male characters from embodying a masculine identity without a sense of deficiencies, he wants to portray the lives of black working-class men based in South Los Angeles in a fictional context from a non-dominant authorial position. The word authentic is important because it is not that Burnett is combating a certain model of black characters who reside in Los Angeles. Authenticity lies in the fact that Burnett is not manufacturing an image for the purpose of satisfying the expectations of watching mainstream American movies with a formulaic storytelling structure. He agreed with his L.A. Rebellion colleagues that the notion of positive images of black people, particularly Sidney Poitier, were speaking primarily to white audiences and refuted a conversation that presented a wide spectrum of black experiences (Kim "Charles Burnett"). Burnett incorporates the difficult realities faced by residents to provide a wider spectrum of the internal lives of African Americans in various communities. Filmmakers of the L.A. Rebellion wanted to make the filmmaking process more transparent for the purpose of transforming residents into critical consumers of black images projected by commercial American cinema. Burnett and his UCLA colleagues wanted to validate the experiences and perspectives of the residents.

Stan's major challenge is to reconcile with his past. The younger generation of black Los Angeles residents distanced themselves from their Southern roots. The attempts of younger residents to distance themselves from their immediate ancestral identity marked a lost opportunity for them to draw parallels between the brutal enforcement of Jim Crow laws with their realities of police brutality and social, political, and economic racial isolation. The relocation of plants and factories that had once provided jobs with family-supporting wages to inaccessible regions further intensified generational indifferences. The children of the Great Migration had to settle for working in the service industry. Sides describes the outcomes of this shift: "The economic dislocation of the Great Migration generation also had severe implications for its children. For an already disillusioned minority of these children, watching their parents lose hard-won jobs confirmed the fruitlessness of playing by the rules" (181-182). A concurrent pattern could be found between the decrease of manufacturing jobs for the working poor and the increase of an underground economy of drug and weapon sales for gangs for younger people from the same demographic. Unlike the working poor, middle-income black families still had access to jobs in professional sectors and were able to continue obtaining homes and automobiles while grooming their children to become second-generation college graduates. Burnett explores in his later films the resistance of younger residents towards their Southern roots because they found them irrelevant to pursuing economic opportunities.

Killer of Sheep's spatial narration captures Stan's transformation at various stages and magnifies the parallels between his personal awakening of his employment and family situations, and the state of his neighborhood shown through the actions of the

children and adults. Once Stan makes peace with a past he finds distracting, he becomes more responsive to his family and neighborhoods. The film's episodic narrative structure furthers the action and awareness of the characters in a way that is so "loose, leisurely, [and] seemingly improvised" that it "might seem like the kind of movie that anybody can make. But nobody had ever made anything like it" (Kim "Charles Burnett").

In regards to the later films that highlight generational indifference, the next chapter discusses the emergence of generational indifference and gender conflict as central male protagonists assert a problematic sense of self-identity and self-determination in *My Brother's Wedding* and *To Sleep with Anger*. *My Brother's Wedding* contains conflicting masculinities that include Pierce, a thirty-year old man living with and working for his parents; Soldier, his friend who has been released from prison and resorts to old habits; Mr. Mundy, Pierce's father who migrated from the South in World War II; and Wendell, Pierce's brother who works as a lawyer and is marrying into a family of black professionals. *To Sleep with Anger* contains conflicting masculinities that include Gideon, a southern migrant and the patriarch of a family who lives in Los Angeles; Harry, his friend from the South who has an overpowering influence on the spirits of the family members; Junior, Gideon's oldest son who adheres to father's values and practices; and Babe Brother, Gideon's youngest son who has a sharp disregard for what his father holds dear. Each film contains perceptions of empowered masculinity fueled by a stagnated maturity in which male protagonists thrive off their indifferent siblings of a different socioeconomic standing, self-sufficient women who frustrate them because they cannot be dominated, and a rejection of a traditional masculine identity based on the values cultivated in the rural South.

Chapter Three

My Brother's Wedding and To Sleep with Anger— The Clash of Masculine Identities

My Brother's Wedding (1983) and *To Sleep with Anger* (1990) are Charles Burnett's first two feature-length films following *Killer of Sheep*. This chapter explores the way Burnett incorporates spatial narration within a conventional cinematic narrative structure to distinguish between traditional and contemporary masculine identities. Each film contains constructions of masculine identities guided by a character's impulsive responses to class distinctions, gender roles, and indifference between older and younger residents. These men embody impulsive behaviors that are best identified through choices and actions that have little or no thought invested in them. Spatial narration allows for cinematic conventions such as parallel editing and the placement of subjects in the mise-en-scène to explore the construction of masculinities expressed in an impulsive manner. The working-class male characters invite low expectations to be placed upon them due to their own lack of self-accountability and rejection of their immediate ancestral past. A by-product of their attitudes is that they refuse to acknowledge women as equal counterparts. Their rejection of their family's values and practices leads to a misinformed sense of masculine identity and stagnation of their personal development.

The central characters respond to a set of low expectations imposed upon them, yet the sentiment each of them conveys is informed by immaturity and a false sense of confidence that prevents them from recognizing their mistakes. *My Brother's Wedding* and *To Sleep with Anger* each embody a form of spatial narration in which Burnett uses interior and exterior spaces to illuminate the hierarchies among all of the characters in each film. These dynamics are based on how he places his characters within the mise-en-

scène. Burnett also employs parallel editing to alternate between simultaneous scenes to magnify compatible and contentious relationships within these hierarchies. Characters inhabit space in which they move freely throughout the neighborhood, yet it reveals the geographic limitations to which they are confined. Geographic space also determines how the different characters in one scene display different types of masculinities and the extent to which they compare and contrast. It reveals shortsightedness as a characteristic of a black masculine identity that relies on false empowerment.

Unlike *Several Friends* and *Killer of Sheep*, *My Brother's Wedding* and *To Sleep with Anger* closely embody the classical Hollywood narrative structure, yet the application of spatial narration subverts this structure to offer a meditative analysis on how generational indifference, class positioning, and gender conflict contribute to how the central male characters identify themselves. *My Brother's Wedding* takes place in South Los Angeles in the 1980s.⁵¹ The multiple and competing expressions of masculine self-identity and self-definition among working-class black men take place between two African American families. One of the families, the Mundys, is faced with their own conflict of values between the migrant parents and their two sons with their own tensions toward each other. Pierce is a former manufacturing worker who now works for and lives with his parents, and Wendell is a lawyer who will soon marry into a family of black professionals. A raging class conflict divides the two sons, as Pierce, who

⁵¹ *My Brother's Wedding* was produced by the German television studio ZDF. When asked about his relationship with the studio and other foreign film and television companies, Burnett explains:

Dealing with foreign backers is a lot of work in itself. They are not interested in making this film into a commercial success, but they are interested in getting prestige and their money back. There is more of a looseness about the way that film work is structured in Europe. It is not as bureaucratic as it is [in the United States]. But that creates other problems. The Europeans are equally loose about the rules and regulations in this country, which are very strict. This looseness costs time and money; things get delayed, and you have to wait. If you get the money here, you can get it quickly, but then there are a lot of strings attached to it. (Hozic 483)

imagines himself as a champion and advocate of the working poor, is his brother's fiercest critic. He accuses Wendell of betraying the environment in which he was raised. Pierce's stance is undermined throughout the film because his idea of strength is misinformed by a false sense of confidence. His lack of motivation to work outside of his parents' dry-cleaning business and his rejection of personal responsibilities show that his lack of accountability is a characteristic of the masculine identity he presents to many people. It reflects false empowerment on his part that his rejection of responsibility strengthens him, plus it prevents others from taking him seriously. Pierce faces his most demanding challenge when he must help his best friend, Soldier, transition back into society after serving a prison sentence. The audience has to determine whether Pierce's challenge also proves to be an inevitable hindrance. The role of spatial narration within a classical Hollywood narrative structure allows the audience to observe the relationship between the construction of traditional and contemporary masculinities. Spatial narration also magnifies the influence of family members who impose low expectations and prompt him to make impulsive and immature responses.

My Brother's Wedding contains scenes that place Pierce in interior and exterior spaces to show his responses to different people and places. Some of his responses prompt his family members and people who meet him for the first time not to take him seriously. The frame of the shot expresses to the audience the level of confidence Pierce feels. The use of subjects in an exterior mise-en-scène is found within the film's brief moments of parallel editing. The exterior setting shows competing masculine identities responding to the space they inhabit and their correspondence with other people within the frame. The relationship between the application of parallel editing and the subject's

positioning within the mise-en-scène help reveal impulsiveness and immaturity as characteristics embedded in the masculine identity Pierce presents. This potential shift in Pierce's characterization can result in helping his best friend transition out of incarceration, effectively counter his brother's bourgeois sensibilities, and become increasingly aware of danger directed towards him.

To Sleep with Anger is set in the last years of the 1980s. At the center of the film are Gideon and Suzie, a couple who migrated to Los Angeles from the South. Their practices of raising chickens at their home, Suzie's role as a midwife, and attending church service on Sundays are foundational components that shape their values and traditions. Their two sons, Junior and Babe Brother, respond differently to their parents' values and practices rooted in the South. Junior exhibits his parents' work ethic and life outlook through his actions with his own family and the way he handles the errands he is asked to do. Babe Brother feels contempt towards the way he was raised and distances his own family from his parents' values and traditions. The tension within the family amplifies dramatically when Gideon and Suzie take in their friend Harry Mention to stay with them for an indefinite period of time. Harry's ability to temper the emotional dynamics of each family member exhibits a dominating aspect of masculinity that has the power to control the actions of others, particularly Gideon and Babe Brother. *To Sleep with Anger* also uses interior spaces to reveal the level of control the characters have over themselves based on their placement within the mise-en-scène. The film also contains crosscutting at two important moments to present competing ideas of masculine identity and the characteristics each one embeds. One moment marks where the conflict is

established between Gideon and Babe Brother, and the other marks when they become transformed by the increasing tension between them.

The Post-Deindustrialized Economic Landscape of South Los Angeles

The patterns of deindustrialization in the last quarter of the twentieth century are important to understand the changing conditions in South Los Angeles in which these films are based. Many of the industries once located in that region moved to the outskirts of the city. One major outcome was that it made it more difficult for residents to make it to work in a timely fashion, particularly those dependent on public transportation. Josh Sides explains how “the personal, economic, psychological consequences of black Los Angeles’s fading blue collar were clearly evident in the physical landscape of the city. In Watts, where poverty had always been endemic, declining manufacturing work merely intensified old problems” (182). Sides observed similar patterns in Compton, another site where the decline of living-wage employment was the outcome of a drastic shift in racial and economic demographics. The population of this industrial suburb changed from predominantly white to predominantly black, which would immediately make it the pride of Southern California’s blue collar African American middle-class. The distinction would lose its relevance as quickly after the industries relocated (Sides 182).

Gerald Horne’s analysis of a de-industrialized Watts after 1965 reveals the increasing class tensions created through organizational commitments to the black middle class as opposed to the working poor. Organizations such as the NAACP and the National Urban League provided outreach that was interpreted by its critics as indifferent and passive towards issues that included excessive police brutality, economic exploitation

by neighborhood storeowners, and other matters that contributed to the impoverished state of the region. The Los Angeles chapters of the NAACP, Urban League, and Congress on Racial Equality (CORE) formed the United Civil Rights Committee in 1963 to create a united front against discriminatory practices against black residents throughout the city.⁵² But Horne argues that these organizations relied too heavily on what he termed a “trickle down” that would grant the middle-class immediate access for economic improvement and the working poor little, if any (180). It can be argued that these representations of black male public leadership contain accommodation as a characteristic of the masculine identity they present.

Horne continues to add, “From its inception it targeted school desegregation as a major issue. It was multiracial, combining seventy-six groups who generated much mass action, picketing, jammed meetings, and so on. However, after the flames of Watts and the white-hot heat of Euro-American reaction ignited black nationalism, it fell apart” (180). The demise of an organized black nationalist front that included the US Organization and the Black Panther Party would devolve into a misguided sense of purpose that black working-class men could not easily grasp. Burnett recalls these indifferent attitudes from his youth:

When I was in high school, no one was expected to go and get any higher education. The teachers were very discouraging. They had the attitude that since you would not amount to anything, why even bother? That was the school and

⁵² The United Civil Rights Committee existed from 1963 through 1966. Their first major protest was a Freedom March in June of 1963, in which nearly 2,000 participants gathered to protest against discriminatory practices throughout the city, namely segregation within the Los Angeles Unified School District. The Committee was also responsible for helping elect Bradley, Gilbert Lindsay, and Billy Mills in the L.A. City Council in 1965. Their biggest battle was against Proposition 14, a bill that sought to repeal the Rumsford Fair Housing Act, a policy that had dismantled racial covenants. They would shortly dissolve after Proposition 14 passed. (Horne 46)

that was the lesson—except for sports, perhaps. We did not even know what else existed from carpentry and plumbing. (Hozic 474)

Sides adds that the black middle-class would offer a similar response towards low-income black residents from Watts as the white homeowners who went to great lengths to make their neighborhoods inaccessible. He adds that the distance shaped the belief held by many low-income residents that their middle-income counterparts betrayed the region when they moved to white-populated neighborhoods (192).

As discussed in scenes throughout *Killer of Sheep*, the pursuit of survival by violent and dangerous means is a characteristic of a masculine identity that slowly emerged once alternative economies replaced the living-wage jobs formerly provided by the deserted plants and factories. The absence of stable family-supporting employment would sow the seeds of a hostile drug-and-weapon based economic subculture. By the early 1980s, a tremendous surge of drug and weapon sales would construct an underground economy in the financially depressed areas of South Los Angeles. The subsequent outcomes ranged from the departure of even more living-wage jobs from the region to a dependence on public transportation schedules with frequent unannounced shifts that would complicate efforts to get to newly relocated jobs.⁵³ Residents also found it more difficult to find work in the service sector industry. Some would seek illegal ways to generate revenue if they found the options through the service sector inadequate.

⁵³ Public transportation would continue to be a challenge for residents in South Los Angeles after plants and factories moved to the outskirts of the city. As Sides mentions,

Poor public and private transportation narrowed employment and consumer options for African Americans. For those who depended on public transportation, employment outside the Alameda industrial corridor brought unbearable, or at least undesirable, commutes. For example, the commute from Watts to Santa Monica, which included several transfers, took up to two hours. The transportation problem also forced many African Americans to shop at expensive local corner stores, engendering deep resentment among blacks toward local store owners. (114)

Mike Davis describes how the escalation of murder with the sharp rise of the cocaine trade in 1984 was

in rough synchronization with the emergence of crack as the narcotic equivalent of fast food and the rerouting of the main cocaine trail from Florida to Southern California via Mexico. Since the beginning of 1987, 'gang related' slayings, principally in Southside city and county areas, have averaged over one per day. (270)

The sharp rise of property crimes would prompt home and business owners to purchase handguns for protection, a direct outcome of residents' dissatisfaction with the LAPD's response to their calls.

Two public images of black masculine identities were placed at odds with one another during the 1980s: the emergence of the gangbanger involved in drug and weapon sales and brutal defense of one's territory; and the affable public official who had to appeal to multiple constituencies to remain in office, even if it meant placing issues concerning low-income black Angelenos on the periphery. The downward spiral of economic instability in South Los Angeles would occur near the end of Tom Bradley's second term as mayor.⁵⁴ Mayor Bradley's disparate relationships with residents of the region reflect the irony of black residents in cities governed by black mayors: they would learn that the person in charge of City Hall who shared their racial identity did not guarantee the demographic much more attention in terms of policy making and economic development. Both of his campaigns for Governor of California (1982, 1986) illustrated

⁵⁴ A former member of the LAPD and city council member, Tom Bradley ran against incumbent Sam Yorty in 1969 and 1973. The first mayoral campaign Bradley ran in 1969 depended upon a coalition of African American and Jewish residents. Many felt that Yorty won not only from his supposed race-baiting of Bradley, but he also benefited from the white backlash against Civil Rights that informed Ronald Reagan's rise to the Governorship in California in 1967 (Horne 280-281).

how Bradley's road to the statehouse in Sacramento collided with the rise of gang activity in South Los Angeles and the aggressive force implemented by the LAPD, which resembled military combat, a characteristic reflective of William Parker's tenure as the Chief of Police.

The LAPD continued to pursue controversial strategies to eliminate gang violence and drug and weapons transactions under Daryl Gates, the protégé of Chief Parker. The most notable of these initiatives was Operation Hammer, in which police officers used a battle ram to knock through building entrances where gang members were suspected of holding weapons and drugs. The unprecedented number of arrests made prompted civilian activists and observers to pursue an evaluation of Operation Hammer. They pointed out that the actions were more focused on criminalizing black and Latino youth than to diffuse gang violence. There was a lopsided ratio between arrests made and actual convictions. Jeff Chang presents figures as to how residents of these targeted areas would file lawsuits on the grounds of destroyed property:

In [1989], Gates's operation netted 25,000 arrests, mainly of youths that appeared to fit the department's gang profile.... By 1992, the city was paying out \$11 million annually in brutality settlements while allocating less than \$2 million to gang intervention programs, and almost half of all young Black males living in South Central were in the gang database" (323-324).

Davis provides a further illustration of the process where random teenagers are pressed up against police cars and "the kids are processed in mobile booking centers, mostly for trivial offenses like delinquent parking tickets or curfew violations. Hundreds more, uncharged, have their names and addresses entered into the electronic database for future

surveillance” (*City of Quartz* 268). The criminalization of youth and the destruction of property in the name of combating gang violence would backfire, making it more difficult for an economic and social recovery in the region.

The impulse of gang members to dominate others for the purposes of survival of was met with the increased efforts to control the most dangerous areas of the city tied to gang affiliations. Law enforcement officials would apply surveillance technology as a strategy to prevent crime in spite of dissatisfaction of residents with the individual requests they make for their personal protection. Helicopter surveillance was coupled with the continuing efforts of Operation Hammer. It was an all-out effort using quasi-military force to patrol the region that reflected a sentiment similar to how Chief William Parker characterized South Los Angeles in the 1950s and ‘60s as if it were occupied by foreign enemies during wartime.⁵⁵ The tactics of Operation Hammer compelled residents displaced from their homes to file lawsuits against the police department and the city of Los Angeles. Such strategies would contribute to a climate where homeowners felt targeted either as potential criminals or not worthy of authorized protection from potential threat of murder.

Mayor Bradley did not address constituents’ concerns about Operation Hammer because he anticipated it as a liability in his gubernatorial campaign. He was virtually silent on controversial tactics LAPD officers used to restrain suspects held in custody

⁵⁵ William Parker was the Chief of the Los Angeles Police Department from 1950 until his death in 1966. He approached the surveillance of South Los Angeles based on his training during World War II. The LAPD also had a reputation for racist practices in its treatment of black residents and its slow efforts to promote black officers through its ranks. Sides points out, “Although it was one of the first to departments to hire African Americans, the LAPD typically assigned black officers to all-black neighborhoods or to highly undesirable traffic duty downtown. During the 1940s, sergeant was the highest rank open to black police officers. Not until the late 1950s were the first African Americans promoted to lieutenant” (Sides 137).

because he thought it would invite accusations of being anti-police. Davis further describes Gates's response to the mayor's anxiety about addressing the LAPD:

Thus insulated from political accountability, Chief Gates was only emboldened to taunt the Black community with increasingly contemptuous or absurd excuses for police brutality. In 1982, for example, following a rash of LAPD 'chokehold' killings of young men in custody, he advanced the extraordinary theory that the deaths were the fault of the victims' racial anatomy, not excessive police force.

(City of Quartz 272)

The refusal of city government and the police department to acknowledge police brutality as a legitimate issue further exacerbated declining conditions.

Ambivalence would persist as a characteristic among black male public leaders when they weighed the increase of gang violence with the excessive force of the LAPD on a variety of black male residents. In spite of criticisms directed towards the application of the chokehold by LAPD officers, black community leaders and elected officials would concede their full support by the late 1980s as the sales, use, and deaths from crack cocaine spread rampantly throughout Los Angeles. Davis characterizes these changing attitudes towards police brutality as the outcome of a crack cocaine-driven economy. It would make hyper-aggressive policing a more palatable option than succumbing to gang violence, as "some Black leaders began to weigh police misconduct as a 'lesser evil' compared to the drug dealing gangs" (*City of Quartz 272*). Davis continues when he mentions the "equal policing" furor after the Westwood shooting gave Gates an unexpected opportunity to "convert some former critics into born-again fans of

his aggressive policing” (272).⁵⁶ Bradley would find the shifting attitudes of activists and elected officials convenient for his own efforts to increase his appeal to voters throughout California.

The increasing surveillance and decreasing economic infrastructure throughout South Los Angeles and other urban areas with concentrated black neighborhoods in the 1980s existed alongside the emergence of African American public figures in popular culture in sports, entertainment, and politics. The combined characteristics of competitiveness, conciliatoriness, and pragmatic calculation informed the presentation of multiple masculine identities from each of these three areas. Nelson George’s assessment of the Civil Rights movement contains an observation about the direct correlation between an increasing black presence in popular culture and the expanded media exposure of black social and political activists, plus athletes and entertainers. He uses the term “post-soul” to describe the transformation of the collective black public image from the 1950s through the 1980s. Post-soul can also describe the outcome of a political and cultural resistance that challenged legal prohibitions of the citizenship and mobility of African Americans.

George points to the recognition of individual accomplishments of black people, particularly men, as benchmarks. The dilemma is these figures never exceeded beyond the status of being rare exceptions. He contends, “Unfortunately, all that progress has not been as beneficial to the black masses as was anticipated in the ‘60s. The achievements

⁵⁶ The LAPD would receive an overwhelming amount of public support after a shooting took place in the Westwood section of Los Angeles on January 30, 1988. Karen Toshima was struck in the head by a stray bullet while caught in the crossfire of members from rival factions in the Crips. After her death, the L.A. City Council passed measures for the LAPD to hire 650 new officers. Chief Gates would request subsequent support, and the resources he received would culminate in Operation Hammer (Chang 322-323).

of role models have not necessarily had a tangible impact on the realities of persistent poverty, poor education, and lingering deep-seated social discrimination” (George, *Post-Soul Nation* ix). George addresses the assumption that upwardly mobile black professionals were anchors of the larger demographic in a similar fashion to Horne’s writings on black middle class organizations and their absent concern for low-income residents. The issue at stake in these two films is the increasing void for youth who do not have an outlet to learn the traditions of their elders. This absence can further exacerbate class disparities and generational indifference.

***My Brother’s Wedding: The Clash between Traditional and Contemporary
Masculine Identities in Post-Deindustrialized South Los Angeles***

The narrative structure of *My Brother’s Wedding* exemplifies how spatial narration persists through a conventional framework. It clearly identifies the catalysts to which Pierce responds based upon how they magnify the false nature of his empowered masculine self-identity. Spatial narration in Burnett’s earlier films, *Several Friends* and *Killer of Sheep*, was established through a loose narrative structure in which scenes were arranged episodically. These films bear little resemblance to the classical Hollywood narrative structure. The structure encompasses a formula that follows the central character’s conflict among physical or psychological forces or other antagonists, a climactic moment that marks the protagonist’s transformation, and a resolution that establishes his future course of action. *My Brother’s Wedding* explores how Pierce’s identity as an empowered man responds to class disparities, indifference between older and younger residents, and gender conflict. It reveals Pierce’s overwhelming insecurity

as a characteristic of his masculine identity that traces to his dependence on his parents for employment and shelter instead. Pierce's refusal to become self-accountable is a hindrance that prevents him from making smart, mature decisions when he is responsible for a major task; however, two catalysts that magnify Pierce's insecurity are his tense relationship with his brother and fiancée and his detachment from his parents. Pierce's bitterness is generated from a feeling of exclusion and jealousy instead of a genuine outrage towards an unequal distribution of wealth. His desire to advocate on behalf of the working poor is at odds with his inclination to be selfish and impulsive.

The opening scene demonstrates the way Pierce is positioned in internal and external spaces to accentuate his responses to certain situations in terms of what he embraces and what he avoids. A neighbor of Pierce invites him to see her sister's newborn baby. Pierce is shown walking down the street in a vast amount of space. He responds to his neighbor as if he is distracted, although he is really doing nothing. Pierce immediately becomes less comfortable when he walks inside her home and is asked to hold the baby. The woman and the baby are the only people who are in the frame with Pierce, but he appears as if he is intruded upon by them. Burnett cuts between a wide shot that captures Pierce and his friend and a medium shot of his friend's sister. She sits alone at the kitchen table smoking a cigarette. The medium shot appears at two points of Pierce's dialogue. It cuts to the baby's mother when Pierce declares he does not want any responsibilities with respect to raising children. A shot of her is shown again when she does not respond to Pierce's question about the whereabouts of the father. These two shots reveal an irony in which the father is absent because, presumably, his attitude is similar to Pierce's. The exchange of shots exhibits an absence/presence of masculinity in

which an audacious expression of one's manhood renders him invisible in crucial moments of other people's lives. Spatial narration in *My Brother's Wedding* functions within its appropriation of the classical Hollywood narrative because it allows for various moments in which Pierce responds to interior and exterior spaces. Often Pierce is either the only person that occupies it or the catalysts that unveil his insecure behavior determine his actions. Pierce's actions within these spaces and in alignment with these characters determine the narrative's progression by informing how his choices anticipate later events.

The film's opening moments establish four important characteristics about how Pierce expresses his masculine identity. First, he has no desire to assume responsibility for himself or others. Second, his commitment to Soldier's transition out of prison and back into society appears to be the one exception to the first point, though it nevertheless raises some questions about Pierce's ability to follow through successfully. Third, it establishes how Pierce is situated in internal and external spaces. His positioning in the *mise-en-scène* signifies his inclination to move in vast spaces with high energy and no direction. Fourth, it reveals his tense feelings towards the family of black professionals his brother is marrying into, particularly his future sister-in-law Sonia.

Pierce reiterates his sentiment about avoiding parental and matrimonial accountability in a scene from the latter half of the film at his parents' dry-cleaning store. Burnett opens this scene with three images of pregnant women that dissolve into one another. When the third consecutive pregnant woman asks Pierce why he is not married, he describes his ideal woman as a principal earner in charge of domestic duties (i.e. cooking and cleaning). He shares this fact while at the workplace of the job provided by

his parents, which confirms that his idea of the perfect relationship demands that someone else provides for him. Burnett situates Pierce in a space of comfort when he is at his parents' home. The space that informs Pierce's confident self-identity becomes disrupted when Wendell invites Sonia to meet his parents. His parents' home becomes a space where Pierce impulsively denounces black upper middle-class identity.

One aspect of Pierce's false sense of empowerment through his masculine identity is that he seeks to dominate women who potentially threaten him. Pierce's first action towards Sonia in a moment they share in his parents' kitchen is to physically corner her and taunt her about "learning how to pick cotton in charm school." The comment suggests that she is far removed from his parents' rural roots, but Sonia responds by explaining how the value of cotton was based on the amount the laborer picked to imply that Pierce is not as closely aligned to his family's roots as he thinks. Burnett creates a tight frame to surround the *mise-en-scène* to amplify the thick tension along class and gender lines between Pierce and Sonia shown in a medium shot. Sonia is a strong source of Pierce's insecurity because she is a self-sufficient professional who has the capability to do all of the things Pierce looks for in his ideal mate. Her unwillingness to do such things, even for her future husband, poses a threat to Pierce.

Pierce's main relationships with other women include a married woman he sees at night after he gets off work, shown in two scenes. Nathan Grant points to Pierce's affair as an illustration of his dismissive attitude towards responsibility: "Pierce is unmarried; his relationship with a married woman provides him with the sexual satisfaction he seeks without ever having to face the obligation of commitment" (145). Another relationship involves a teenage girl who drops by the dry-cleaning store to talk to Pierce, sometimes

to complain about her menstrual cramps. In two of these scenes, Pierce never says anything in response to her advances, yet he shows no signs of resistance. His false self-identification as an empowered man does not allow for mutuality between him and a woman. Instead it constructs an illusion that he possesses the power to physically or psychologically dominate a woman. The contentious exchanges he has with Sonia, his mother, and other women he is unable to control further undermine his false sense of power.⁵⁷

Burnett arranges his characters within the *mise-en-scène* to capture Pierce's impulsive expressions of masculinity in the space of upper middle-class professionals. The first shot of the two families sharing space together is a wide shot of everyone at the Debois's dinner table. The coverage of the space is broken down to where characters are framed in single shots and two-shots as characters converse with one another. Their mannerisms mark sharp distinctions along class lines. Everyone is separated by significant gaps of space at the table. Their personalities are further accentuated by their body language and exchanges between one another. The polite sentiments from the Mundys, Wendell, and Sonia are undergirded by the anticipation that Pierce will erupt and embarrass everyone at any moment. The Debois's home produces tremendous discomfort for Pierce for it is not only unfamiliar to him, but it reflects the clash of values he has between Sonia and, subsequently, her father. A shot/reverse shot captures single medium shots of Pierce and Mr. Debois. He asks Pierce why he never wanted to become a doctor or a lawyer or any other kind of professional. Pierce responds with a list of

⁵⁷ Grant offers another observation about Pierce's underdeveloped masculine identity: "Although the playful matches between father and son are cute in their way, they suggest Pierce's infantilization by his parents, a nurturing of his avoidance of responsibility; as well, there is Angela (Angela Burnett), the nubile adolescent who flirts with Pierce without shame, and to whom Pierce—though he may be hiding his ardor under an 'older man's cool'—appears to pay something more than just polite attention" (145).

duties for which he was responsible at a manufacturing plant until the workers went on strike. He adamantly asserts his masculine identity when he declares that he likes to work with his hands while condemning doctors and lawyers as corrupt and lecherous. Pierce goes on to ruin Sonia's announcement about her recent courtroom victory by insisting that the murder will remain unresolved in spite of the outcome in her favor. She abruptly leaves the dinner table in tears.

Pierce's mother responds in embarrassment to her son's blanket condemnation of the black professional class. Wendell's marriage to Sonia signifies upward mobility for his mother in terms of class status, and Mrs. Mundy fears that Pierce's posturing threatens that opportunity. Pierce's defense on behalf of undereducated laborers reveals more about his insecurities of being around black professionals than it does about his passion to speak on behalf of the "have-nots." Pierce's insecurities compel him to continue characterizing Sonia's pronouncement of her parents' values and her middle-class upbringing as ostentatious. His disdain also places Wendell and Sonia as his professional and educational adversaries. Pierce's potentially valid arguments are undermined by his personal irresponsibility and his unreasonable statements.

The positioning of Burnett's characters within the internal and external *mise-en-scène* magnifies competing presentations of traditional and contemporary masculine identities. This dichotomy is characterized by the migrant elders who escaped Jim Crow segregation in the Southeastern United States. The younger residents faced with diminishing opportunities for living-wage employment, constant police surveillance, and

deliberate exclusion from nearby white homeowners and some black upper middle-class residents are at the latter end.⁵⁸

When Pierce and Mr. Mundy engage in horseplay within the tight confines of the dry-cleaning store, it is a rare departure from the contentious interactions between younger and older residents. Their exchanges come at the expense of Mrs. Mundy's discomfort. The scene is one of few moments where Burnett complicates the otherwise tense intergenerational relations. Pierce's roughhousing with his father resembles a similar kind of interaction between Pierce and Soldier. Their most aggressive displays of their masculine identity takes place when they think no consequences will result from their actions. A scene from the earlier half of the film shows Soldier at his parents' house after being released from prison. A long shot is merged with a long take when Soldier walks towards his father in their rear house. They embrace each other strongly upon their first sight of each other in a way that suggests they are bridging an emotional gap of many years' duration.

Burnett uses a combination of parallel editing and series of long shots to show how Pierce and Soldier express their own distinct masculine self-identities. He uses the intercutting of long shots to show the spaces that Pierce and Soldier occupy before they meet at the bus station. Soldier waits outside of the bus station while Pierce runs frantically through the streets after he gets off of the bus. The camera captures a rare moment where Pierce hustles through a sea of people in the street because his clear

⁵⁸ Robinson explains further about class tensions among black Angelenos linked to a generational gap: On the one hand, blacks continued to experience symbolic social gains such as Bradley's continued visibility as mayor and the presidential candidacies of Jesse Jackson. On the other hand, black youth—both in the inner city and suburban black settlement areas—seemed to be growing more disaffected and farther and farther out of control as the decade progressed. Gang violence in Los Angeles reached record levels in the 1980s, and many of the victims were black youths. (49-50)

objective is to meet his best friend. This scene follows other moments where Pierce and Soldier move energetically through the neighborhood streets. The underlining irony is that their energy cannot be invested into any kind of living-wage employment opportunity because none are available in the region. This moment also reveals how two men whose self-identities depend on dominating others do not have the resources to substantiate such actions.

Burnett presents a montage of shots that show Pierce and Soldier running through the neighborhood streets. The presentation of a long shot within a long take magnifies a waywardness that reinforces doubts about their abilities to make smart decisions. One of these shots finds Soldier and Pierce tumbling into a homeowner's lawn. He comes out with a handgun and forces both men to leave as quickly as possible. The action captured without a single edit or camera movement exemplifies how both men are so self-absorbed that they are unaware of both the dangers around them, and how others might perceive them as a potential danger. A later scene contains a dangerous interaction when Pierce and Soldier chase a man who tries to shoot both of them. Burnett captures the action in a sequence of quick edits that show the man firing what turns out to be an unloaded gun. Pierce and Soldier subsequently chase the attempted killer as shown in a series of long shots. The moment marks a shift in which both men snap out of their self-absorbed state and retaliate against someone who has attempted to harm them.

In *My Brother's Wedding*, Burnett uses a different kind of cinematic technique to articulate the masculine identity that, in *Killer of Sheep*, was driven by the attempt to dominate people through criminal activity. He uses insert shots when male characters attempt to dominate others through criminal activity. The previously discussed scene

contains an insert shot of the gun used to try and kill Pierce and Soldier to magnify their level of obliviousness at that point. Other examples of insert shots show either anticipation or a direct threat of violence. These shots become a reoccurring motif of characters concealing handguns in their homes and businesses that reinforces the distrust between them all. The first example shown is when Pierce is sent to pick up a pot from his Aunt Hattie caring for his maternal grandparents. He knocks the door so hard when he arrives that she searches for her gun and uses it to answer the door. The insert shots point to how homeowners must rely on their own protection in the face of declining responsiveness of the police. The amplified skepticism that persists throughout South Los Angeles in *My Brother's Wedding* is an outcome of the tensions between generations of black working-class men in South Los Angeles. The decline in safety anticipated in *Killer of Sheep* has reached full scale in *My Brother's Wedding*. Residents have become increasingly concerned about security throughout the region. Davis discusses the concept of security to magnify the relationship between safety and economic privilege. He emphasizes that it “has less to do with personal safety than with the degree of personal insulation, in residential, work, consumption, and travel environments, from ‘unsavory’ groups and individuals, even crowds in general” (*City of Quartz* 224). Davis’s observation of affluent white suburban residents accurately reflects the anxieties of elder black residents in South L.A. once conditions began to decline.

A major distinction between these two generations of black working-class men is the level of resilience and motivation in the face of difficult circumstances. Pierce’s father exhibits his sentiments informed by his migration to Los Angeles in a scene where his wife receives a letter from a relative who needs money. Mr. Mundy refuses to give

the relative money because he believes the male relatives should be subjected to conditions like those he experienced as a sharecropper to understand the importance of earning money. His wife dismisses what he says as “old folks talk” and insists that they should assist those in need as a duty of their Christian faith. Pierce’s grandfather exemplifies how religious values also inform the values of an earlier generation. As Bishetta Merritt observes in this and other films by Burnett,

“Spirituality, never subtle in a Burnett film, undergirds his characters and adds focus and humanity to their lives. The characters read the Bible, attend church, assist the needy, and care for their parents and grandparents. In some instances, the audiences shares in the religious experience, whereas in other settings, the characters’ behavior reveals their connection to the church.” (117)

Pierce’s only engagement in religious activities is when his grandparents ask him to read biblical passages to them. These moments show that faith is central to his grandfather’s masculine identity. His grandfather asks him at this moment about Soldier’s faith because he senses that something bad will happen to him. Pierce learns of Soldier’s death in a car crash shortly afterwards. It is difficult for people to recognize resiliency in Pierce and Soldier because they give in to their vacuous pleasures very easily. These indulgences involve an uncontrollable pursuit of women and a disregard for anything that demands accountability and concentration.

An earlier mention was made of the relationship between Pierce and his father about their way of identifying themselves as men along generational lines. Their differing perceptions of reality become more evident when Pierce audaciously asks Wendell and Sonia to change their wedding date so that he can attend Soldier’s funeral.

Mr. Mundy follows Wendell and Sonia's emphatic objection to Pierce's request with an assertive explanation that too much of a financial and emotional investment has been made to abruptly change plans. This scene magnifies Pierce's inability to examine his limitations and anxieties due to the internal clash between his impulsive desires and absence of motivation. Pierce ultimately misses Soldier's funeral in spite of leaving the wedding before it starts and borrowing someone else's car to get there. It also exhibits another example of parallel editing, as discussed by Merritt: "Burnett's expert use of parallel editing creates added suspense as scenes alter between the wedding, the funeral, and Pierce, who leaves the wedding to race across town to the funeral. His decision to attend the funeral and, therefore, choose friendship over family, proves disastrous and he misses both events" (113). Pierce's major dilemma serves as another example of how he submits to impulsive thinking instead of making smart and intelligible decisions.

Pierce's reliance on physically dominating women reveals an inability to control his life and an impulse to comply with distractions and trivial conflicts as shown in his scenes with Sonia. Pierce's diminished and falsely empowered sense of identity and self-determination is more about responding to the moment than developing a lifelong strategy for survival and making substantive long-term choices. Burnett's observation about the increasing distance between older and younger residents helps magnify why Pierce has adopted this kind of attitude: "You look around and you see [the socioeconomic diversity of the community] disappear. It's gone. And you wonder why kids today now are without a foundation and such and such. And it just hit me at a time when I thought it was really important to talk about it....You realize that there is the missing link and lack of continuity" (Kim and Livengood 70). *To Sleep with Anger, My*

Brother's Wedding, and *Killer of Sheep* all inquire whether the children of migrants born in South Los Angeles consider their immediate cultural memory relevant to survive in an environment vulnerable to increases in crime.

Earlier chapters in this project point to the difficulties faced by migrants who are trying to pursue a way of life that was readily available to white residents in Los Angeles earlier in the twentieth century. The migrants obtained property and accumulated material wealth on a modest family-supporting wage in the face of these obstacles.⁵⁹ But the decline of the local economic infrastructure followed the Watts Revolt, which meant younger residents had less accessibility to those jobs that had been available for those who had made up the Great Migration to the West. Pierce's failure to pursue the opportunities available outside South Los Angeles, despite the difficulties in getting to such opportunities (as discussed earlier) is, in part, a reflection of generational wisdom. His entrapment in a cycle of dependency guards him from facing any of the major responsibilities that accompany upward mobility. Wendell suppresses his family identity because his level of education and professional occupation grant him access to material wealth and cultural capital to interact in circles outside of his parents' circumference. Wendell wants to exceed his parents to the point where his urban upbringing erases any traces of his parents' geographic and cultural roots.

The function of the film's spatial narration allows for the use of the long take and the long shot to situate characters within the *mise-en-scène* to reveal the catalysts that

⁵⁹ Alex Alonso outlines the efforts to dismantle housing covenants that discriminated against African American residents: "From *Shelley v. Kraemer* in 1948, which increased housing opportunities and hastened black migration into white areas, to the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in 1954, to California's *Unruh Act* in 1959, which outlawed discrimination for housing and employment, to the *Rumford Act* in 1963, which prohibited discriminatory real estate practices, the Los Angeles area became increasingly more attractive to black migrants" (142).

prompt a certain way of thinking. These factors identify generational, class, and gender indifferences as determinants for Pierce's impulsive responses to low expectations and disruptions of his myopic self-perception of what he wants to do with his life and his imagination of an ideal mate. Burnett's presentation of Pierce reflects the shifts taking place in the early 1980s with respect to diminishing employment opportunities and increasing class disparities among black people in South Los Angeles and the unfortunate inadequate responses to them.

My Brother's Wedding can be read as a counterpoint to the mainstream films of the 1980s that Manthia Diawara analyzes with prominent black actors portraying these characters. He examines the relationship between black male spectatorship and the cinematic techniques used to establish character agency. Diawara traces the dominant portrayal of black men in mainstream Hollywood cinema over the course of seventy years and how it has affected black male viewers. Diawara's observations of the black male protagonist as either a comic foil (Reggie Hammond in *48 Hrs.* [1982]) or a brutal threat (Mister in *The Color Purple* [1985]) may prompt one to identify Pierce and Soldier in *My Brother's Wedding* as one of these categories. In *48 Hrs.*, Reggie Hammond is a street hustler serving time in prison when he is recruited by a detective to catch two murderers to whom he has close ties. Hammond is either handcuffed to the car by the bigoted detective as they look for associates of the suspected murderers, or he goes to great lengths to impersonate the detective, a showcase for Eddie Murphy to display his wisecracking persona made famous by his stand-up concerts and performances on *Saturday Night Live*. *The Color Purple* portrays Mister as a brutal middle-aged man who violently asserts his dominance over his significantly younger bride, but who presents a

completely opposite personality when he tries to court the juke joint performer Shug Avery in the face of her multiple rejections of his hospitality. What distinguishes Burnett's characters from Diawara's examples is that he offers his portrayals of Pierce and Soldier in correspondence with the same longer historical and social context specific to South Los Angeles that informs his earlier films. The character's masculine identities are placed alongside the cultural memory and history of black Los Angeles residents after World War II and the outcome of the Watts Revolt.

Diawara is most interested in each case whether or not Reggie Hammond or Mister are uncontrollably dominating or justifiably subjugated within their respected diegetic worlds. Through its conventional narrative structure, *My Brother's Wedding* offers what Diawara describes as an opportunity for the spectator to construct a critical position rather than seek a cathartic response ("Black Spectatorship" 219). Diawara's distinction between real and representation emerges from his concern about black male subjectivity. He advocates black male spectators adopt a resistant spectatorship that refuses to accept the inevitable subjugation of the black male protagonist. Diawara also encourages these spectators to actively interrogate any stylistic patterns that repeatedly produce the same outcome. *My Brother's Wedding* invites a more complex examination of the multiple presentations of black working-class masculine identity than a neatly resolved conclusion. The spatial narration demands the kind of spectatorship practices Diawara describes as resistant. The film's narrative structure ultimately points to the declining economic conditions in South Los Angeles and conflicts that have intensified within the demographic that resides there. The catharsis lies in recognizing the problems instead of anticipating an edifying resolution.

My Brother's Wedding foregrounds a black working-class male protagonist who struggles to find living employment and a safe place to live amidst the outcome of the Watts Revolt. Pierce's major obstacle is his impulsiveness that leads him to make decisions that are not always in his best interests. Diawara's concept of "cinema of the real" helps identify independent films that do not seek cathartic responses.⁶⁰ The cathartic element in *My Brother's Wedding* depends on the character's potential self-discovery and development of their ability to survive challenging circumstances comparable to *Killer of Sheep*.

George addresses the assumption that upwardly mobile black professionals were anchors of the larger demographic in a way that mirrors Gerald Horne's analysis of how black middle-class organizations were slow to reach out to lower-income residents. Burnett is most concerned about an increasing void for youth who have no outlet to learn about their elders' past traditions. Burnett attributes this to class stratification within areas that have a high concentration of black residents:

In Watts before the Civil Rights Movement, everyone was grouped together; the upper classes and the lower classes had to coexist. So there was a direction, a sense of who you were. After that, it somehow broke down. People moved out because new opportunities were open to them. They left a big vacuum in the community. You grew up seeing a lot of your friends getting into trouble.
(Reynaud 326)

⁶⁰ Diawara describes his concept of "cinema of the real" as "no manipulation of the look to bring a spectator to a passive state of uncritical identification" ("Black Spectatorship" 219).

Pierce is under the illusion that his anger and bitterness towards the black middle-class is in defense of the working poor, yet the tensions between Wendell, Sonia and her family, and his parents remain unresolved by the film's end.

To Sleep with Anger: The Clash of Masculine Identities and the Fight to Preserve Cultural Memory

Spatial narration in *To Sleep with Anger* enables two specific conventions that illuminate the competing presentations of masculine identity. The use of parallel editing illustrates these varying expressions in terms of generational indifference and the way it disrupts the transfer of values. The placement of characters within the mise-en-scène also illuminates the ways in which men express their sense of self-identity and self-expression within the space they inhabit and the people who surround them. *To Sleep with Anger* uses conventions that align closely with the practices of continuity editing within the classical Hollywood narrative structure. This film is not dependent on the alternation between handheld and stationary cinematography, long shots within long takes, a loose narrative structure, and a rhythmic approach to editing in the same way as in *Several Friends*, *The Horse*, and *Killer of Sheep*. A subversive quality of *To Sleep with Anger* is that it incorporates folklore to magnify internal struggles that directly tie to both class and generational indifference. Spatial narration allows for folklore to persist through a conventional display of the classical Hollywood narrative structure. The presence of folklore within the structure exemplifies how one's indigenous codes and practices emerge through a more standardized form of cinematic storytelling. The rise of

criminality in South Los Angeles is not referenced in the same manner in *To Sleep with Anger* as in *My Brother's Wedding*. It nevertheless offers an insight into the life of a family whose tensions revolve along the lines of traditional and contemporary masculine identities.

The presence of class stratification in *To Sleep with Anger* directly informs the competing expressions of masculine identity. Junior and Babe Brother each exhibit an identity that responds to their relationship to their parents' practices and values. The class identities of Babe Brother and Junior are not neatly identical to those of Pierce and Wendell. The divide in *My Brother's Wedding* was determined by access to education and employment in the professional sector. It was best captured by Pierce's disapproval of Wendell marrying into a family of black professionals. The polarity in *To Sleep with Anger* comes from the commitment to the family's values and a pursuit of material gain. Babe Brother is the film's most urgent case in this conflict because his vacuous obsession with earning money and accumulating material wealth is a central characteristic of his masculine identity. His professional aspirations are distant from how his father earned a living. He finds the practices he learned as a child irrelevant to his personal ambitions and the way he raises his son.

Babe Brother's masculine identity is further marked by his defiance of his parents and his obsession with professional ascendance and the material access that comes with it. His objectives are what make him vulnerable to Harry's manipulation. Babe Brother and his father are so deeply entrenched in their ideas of what it means to be a man that Harry thrives off of their combative interaction. Parallel editing marks two moments that establish both the power of Harry's influence over Babe Brother and Gideon and his

capacity to control the intensity of their transformed states as central characteristics to his masculine identity. The first moment occurs when Harry looks after the house while Gideon and Suzie attend church with Junior and his family. Burnett shows scenes of the family listening to the choir and the pastor deliver his sermon, followed with shots of church parishioners being baptized in a pool. These shots are intercut with a series of medium shots between Harry, Babe Brother, Babe Brother's wife, Linda, and their son, Sunny.

Linda is willing to go into Gideon and Suzie's house when she knows they are not there, in contrast to staying in the car while Babe Brother goes inside, if she knows that Gideon and Suzie are home. Harry responds to Linda's observation of him being different than her in-laws by responding that he is more "modern" in his ways. He pulls out a rabbit's foot attached to the handle of his knife and immediately withdraws it from Sunny when he tries to touch it. It marks the second encounter in which Sunny threatens Harry with a gesture that brings bad luck. Another gesture of bad luck is when Sunny sweeps a broom over Harry's feet when Gideon introduces him to the entire family. Babe Brother is most responsive to Harry among the three of them. Sunny is feared by Harry, while his mother is disregarded by Gideon's guest. Harry pulls out a deck of cards later in the scene and pulls one out as he shares a dangerous encounter from his past. Linda's attempt to draw a card prompts a quick response shot from Babe Brother, who slaps her hand and declares she is not a participant. Harry, Linda, and Babe Brother are shown in a medium shot in which the couple is embraced by Gideon's and Suzie's guest before they return from church. Babe Brother is deeply engaged while Linda is visibly uncomfortable.

Babe Brother's initial interaction with Harry while with his family contrasts with his most tense exchange with Gideon, showing how these competing presentations of masculine identity clash within him. Gideon and Suzie have a conversation with Babe Brother and Linda in front of their home while hosting a fish fry at Harry's request. Gideon scolds his son and daughter-in-law and accuses them of taking advantage of their willingness to care for their son. Babe Brother later erupts when his father compares him to Junior and expresses his displeasure with always being compared to his older brother. Suzie demands they both shake hands and resolve their conflict before they walk back in the house. The exchange between the two couples is intercut between a conversation with Harry and Marsh, a friend of Gideon's and Suzie's from back home. Marsh alleges that Harry murdered a relative of his and made it appear as if he was lynched, nearly causing a race riot. An interchange of medium shots is used to capture their conversation that shows Marsh standing while Harry sits. It shows that Marsh is confident enough to challenge Harry and defend himself against his potential manipulation or intimidation. The parallel editing in this sequence demonstrates that Harry has an absent/present influence on Gideon and Babe Brother based on the access they allow him, even as his manipulative powers are weakened in the presence of a less vulnerable soul.

The first example of parallel editing to illustrate these competing expressions of masculine identity sets the stage for other moments after Harry has gained control over the conditions of Gideon and Babe Brother. The church and the reliance on folk spiritual practices such as the tobie, a charm designed to offer spiritual protection, conflict with each other in a scene where the reverend and members of the congregation visit to pray over Gideon. They notice that Suzie has placed some leaves at Gideon's feet as they

begin to pray. The reverend expresses his disappointment that Suzie would not rely on prayer solely as opposed to what he calls “old-fashioned remedies.” The fact that Suzie finds conventional Christian practices ineffective to revive her husband demonstrates how strong of a hold Harry has over Gideon spiritually. Harry’s influence over Babe Brother becomes evident when Linda is preparing dinner for Harry’s friends. Babe Brother fusses at her about Sunny’s shoes not being tied while she is preparing the food. He impulsively slaps her across the face when she tries to help him sort through the food. She responds instantly by pulling a serving fork on him. Her displeasure is shown as she serves food and dumps it on the plate deliberately. The scene also continues what happens in this example of parallel editing. Harry has such a strong grasp of Babe Brother that he fails to realize the amount of harm he inflicts upon his wife and son.

Central characteristics to Gideon’s expression of his masculine identity are codes and practices that trace back to his days in the South. One example is Gideon’s urgent search for his tobie, shown at the beginning of the film after he wakes up from a nap in his backyard while holding a bible. He is unable to find it until Sunny accidentally knocks down a sugar jar filled with marbles, which also contained his tobie. Gideon ultimately recovers his tobie, yet Harry’s loss of his explains why the rabbit’s foot serves as a replacement and the reason he has been looking over his shoulder ever since, as he explains to Babe Brother and Linda. The nostalgia for the values, customs, and practices of the South is a crucial reason why Gideon and Suzie invite Harry into their home without question. Harry is able to effectively convey a romantic past of the South that appeals to Babe Brother in a way that Gideon has never done. Harry sensationalizes this nostalgia with stories of violent confrontations and careless pursuits of promiscuous

women. Babe Brother's desire to live in a South that likely never existed threatens to break up his family. Babe Brother is captivated by Harry's anecdotes to the point where they ultimately transform him.

Folklore serves a basis for how older black migrants express their masculine identity; both Gideon and Harry have a passion for telling stories. Its incorporation in *To Sleep with Anger* is found in Harry's characterization. The version of Hairy Man in *To Sleep with Anger* is someone who gains people's trust in order to possess their souls. Harry displays glimpses of his impulses toward sex and violence beneath his Southern gentleman persona that ultimately captivates Babe Brother. Babe Brother internalizes Harry's influence so deeply that he refuses to help fix his mother's roof while it rains heavily outside. This prompts a physical battle between the two sons that requires Suzie to intervene to keep Junior from stabbing Babe Brother with Harry's knife. She suffers a cut to her hand, which is what it takes to unravel Harry's influence on Babe Brother. Burnett explains his appropriation of Hairy Man: "There is a character called Hairyman who comes along when you are in trouble and he offers to give you what you desire if you trade it for your soul. Almost after accepting the deal, you regret it and you learn that in order to get your soul back, you have to outsmart him when he comes for you" (Kim "Charles Burnett").⁶¹ Burnett enacts spatial narration by demonstrating how the oral folktale transfers to a film that embodies a conventional narrative structure.

⁶¹ The closest correspondence to Burnett's definition of Hairy Man derives from one of the title characters in the Depression-era play *Wiley and the Hairy Man*. The story existed as an oral folktale until it was written into a play by Donnell van de Voort as part of the Federal Writers Project. It was formally published in 1972 by Susan Zeder, who set it in the swamps of Alabama. A boy named Wiley must go to the swamp to find materials to build a house for his dog. He must go past a deeply feared figure named Hairy Man to obtain what he needs. Wiley must outsmart the Hairy Man by determining if he should rely on the charms and chants his mother has provided for him or his own strategies. (Krusaka, "Wiley and the Hairy Man: Study Guide Created for the CSU Bakersfield Theatre for Young Audiences Tour")

Sunny becomes Harry's inadvertent nemesis because he performs actions that bring potential bad luck, a threat to the presentation of Harry's masculine identity and ultimately his life. He is an outlet for the expressions of masculine self-identity for his father and grandfather. Babe Brother's assertion to Sunny that he is the boss (as stated on his coffee cup) while enabling Sunny to disobey his mom magnifies the way Babe Brother misguides his son at times. It is an ironic moment because Babe Brother's attempts to present himself as a responsible man result in a gesture of disrespect towards his wife and further reinforcement of the low expectations his family places on him. Sunny also serves as Gideon's outlet for listening to folkloric stories. Burnett uses a standard shot/reverse shot to capture Gideon telling a story about four preachers confessing their sins. The last one discloses that his sin is gossip, and he plans to share everything disclosed in secrecy. Suzie overhears and condemns Gideon for sharing such stories. She later expresses discomfort when Gideon tells her a story about heaven and hell after he awakes from his coma. Suzie cuts him off before he gets to the punchline and objects to hearing further stories about hell. She uses her experience of intervening in a fight between her sons and subsequently cutting her hand as an example of how she envisions hell: a disruption that threatens to tear her family apart. Her refusal to hear the end of Gideon's story reflects the clash between the content of folklore that Gideon values and the realities of trying to save her family from the spiritual turmoil Harry has brought upon them.

Spatial narration allows for the use of crosscutting and the placement of subjects in the mise-en-scène throughout *To Sleep with Anger* to magnify the clash of different ideas of what it means to be a man. The objective of the film aligns with Tommy Lott's

interest in “a more fundamental definitional question regarding the nature of black cinema, a question that raises deeper issues concerning both the concept of black identity and the concept of cinema itself” (83). The presence of spatial narration within a structure that aligns with the classical Hollywood narrative allows for the “reclamation and reconstruction of aesthetics” that Lott discusses (89). The film nevertheless centralizes a contemporary treatment of southern African-American folklore to point out tensions within a family along the lines of class and acknowledgement of past traditions.

Epilogue: Burnett’s Presentations of Masculine Identities and The Prevalent Images of Black Men in Dominant Media

My Brother’s Wedding and *To Sleep with Anger* offer treatments of how black working-class men in South Los Angeles construct ideas of masculine self-identity and self-determination that differ significantly from popular media in news, music, and movies. Burnett’s films create a space to tell the stories of black Angelenos who Aida Hozic describes as,

first or second generation transplants from the South. Uprooted yet again, they are continuously torn between remembering and forgetting, between being who they are—people stripped of everything but their dignity—and what the world expects them to be—docile and servile citizens with no past or future. Their memories, once removed, do not seem like theirs anymore. (472)

The dominant narrative of black men in Los Angeles was presented in the context of drug and gang culture from films and rap music.

S. Craig Watkins's analysis of urban-themed films of the early 1990s (*Boyz n the Hood*, 1991; *Menace II Society*, 1993) serves a similar function as George's meditations on the relationship between political resistance and popular culture. He argues that the context of rap music and the subcultural aspects of fashion and language that emerge from it produce a potential political capital. Their consumption of commodities embodies a control of their identity that is not dictated by popular media. Watkins acknowledges that this commodification is not consistent with more recognizable forms of political agency that involve direct action and advocacy. He nevertheless asserts that "the tenor of black youth popular culture continues to have a political resonance.... Racialized cultural objects like *the black ghetto* become fiercely charged locations of ideological struggle as competing cultural producers struggle to assign them meaning" (197, emphasis added). Commercial news media would produce images of life in South Los Angeles similar to those in the narratives of rap songs, in which the presence of working-class men was ignored or eliminated. *My Brother's Wedding* and *To Sleep with Anger* diverts from reinforcing sensational images that are regularly perpetuated through popular media. These films are more concerned with the declining patterns in the region's economic infrastructure and the effects they have on the collective psyche of black men.

Burnett's films seek to restore a cultural and historical identity that directly counters the popular images of black masculinity in South Los Angeles of the time. Watkins illuminates the how the narrative of the underclass (i.e., black and Latino youth from working-poor families) are circulated through news media similarly to the way in which television and print news circulated images of urban unrest in Watts and other

major cities in the latter half of the 1960s. Watkins contests that the news media is designed to orchestrate and reinforce institutional structures that thrive on identifying this demographic as a problem. He describes this as a form of social control that produces a constructed image of black masculinity that thrives on terrorizing the well-being of others:

News media organizations specialize in visualizing—and accordingly, defining—deviant behavior for their audience. In the process the news media also reproduce commonsense notion of civility, social order, and community consensus.

Moreover, the focus on deviance develops an entertainment angle that appeases the commercial interests of news media organizations. (Watkins 59-60)

A major observation within Watkins's analysis is the apparatus through which news media excludes black working-class men. It focuses instead on young black males who are more vulnerable towards criminal activity than living-wage employment that is no longer available. The presentations of black masculinity in *My Brother's Wedding* and *To Sleep with Anger* challenge these institutions in the way they offer cinematic portrayals of black men that are absent in dominant media outlets. Both films serve as counter-narratives that do not confine black men to a singular representation as a potential or an actual criminal, similar to *Killer of Sheep* in the context of the McCone Commission's report on the Watts Revolt and the Moynihan Report.

The dominant presence of black youth in news media as a gangbanger directly countered the image of Mayor Bradley as a black chief executive in a major city seeking opinions from residents throughout California. Bradley's image aligns closely to the kind of upwardly mobile black professional George illustrates earlier in the chapter. A factor

that complicates this dichotomy is the argument that the city's elite were privileged by Bradley's policies at the expense of building the economic infrastructure of the city's most vulnerable residents. The neglect of the latter is credited with producing the proliferation of the gangbanger. Bradley's efforts tie directly with Watkins's analysis about this phenomenon that:

[T]he general public must be made to feel that the stability of the moral and social order is threatened, thus necessitating dramatic acts to preserve social order.

Representing ghetto youth as dangerous is not simply a symbolic exercise; it has serious implications for social policy and also influences the social control mechanisms put in place to restore a sense of order. (61)

The dichotomy nevertheless does not allow agency for black working-class men that resemble Pierce, Soldier and Junior, or even middle-class materialists like Babe Brother and Wendell, who veer closer to Mayor Bradley. This kind of exclusion is expressed in the way Pierce generalizes a family full of black professionals in *My Brother's Wedding*. Burnett's objective to unveil the history and culture of black Los Angelenos in contemporary times begins with carving out a cinematic space to expose their lives.

Outside of the context of traditional and contemporary black working-class masculine identities in the late 1980s/early '90s is the emergence of a black gay male identity in public media and independent film. 1989 marked the airing of Marlon Riggs' *Tongues Untied* on the PBS documentary series P.O.V. *Tongues Untied* is a non-fictional meditation on black gay male sexuality. It contains a voiceover of Riggs directly addressing the camera as he explains how he came to identify as a gay male. A reoccurring theme of the film is the way silence functions as a shield from homophobia

among black churches and nationalist circles, while fighting the racist aesthetics of black stereotypes in LGBT-based media. Riggs intertwines episodes that range from a parody of gestures identified as effeminate (i.e., “the diva snap”) to addressing the dangers of HIV/AIDS and violence towards black gay men. Riggs’ attempt to create a space for black gay men in dominant culture was immediately met by resistance from congressional leaders. These conservative opponents wanted to silence Riggs and deny federal funding to PBS. In addition, they made derogatory accusations that his film was a form of LGBT pornography. In spite of the controversy it attracted, Riggs’ documentary functions as a spatial narration arranged by vignettes and testimonies to reveal the various dynamics of gay male sexuality as part of one’s masculine identity.

Tongues Untied was aired after the release of Isaac Julien’s *Looking for Langston* (1986). *Looking for Langston* is an experimental documentary that serves as a meditation on identity of Langston Hughes and twentieth century black gay male writers. Julien uses the aesthetic of the Harlem Renaissance found in the pictures of Carl Van Vechten to create a re-imagining of Hughes’s life.⁶² It presents a man who resembles Hughes as an object of desire between a black man and a white man. They are shot in black and white and their presentations alternate between wearing tuxedos in a nightclub to lying in bed together. Julien shifts between a contemporary re-creation of the Harlem Renaissance and same-sex eroticism to magnify Hughes’s sexuality as a central part of his masculine identity.

A commonality Burnett and his colleagues of the Los Angeles School of Black Filmmakers share with Riggs and Julien is the use of unconventional narrative structures

⁶² The photographs of Carl Van Vechten and James Van der Zee were the basis for the production design of *Looking for Langston*.

to magnify the lives of marginalized populations.⁶³ As Burnett demonstrates with his films from this period, *My Brother's Wedding* and *To Sleep with Anger* each exhibit a practice of spatial narration within a conventional narrative structure that allows for parallel editing and the placement of subjects within an interior and exterior mise-en-scène. This practice unveils various expressions of masculine self-identity and how it cultivates a sense of self-definition along the lines of socioeconomic and generational indifference. Both films also allow a space to present the ways in which a younger generation of black men rejects the prior history and culture of their elders. Pierce and other characters in *My Brother's Wedding* live with the consequences of not absorbing their parents' work ethic and moral values. Pierce is entrapped in a cycle of dependency in which he protects himself from significant responsibilities. Wendell's level of education and professional occupation inspires him to exceed his parents' material wealth to the point where their migrant identity is erased from his. Both brothers have internalized their urban upbringing at the expense of any trace of their parents' geographical and cultural roots.

Burnett describes young African American residents during this period as "the lost generation." He attributes youth's attraction to gang culture to a deficiency of the folk culture tied to residents who migrated from the South during World War II. The decrease of family-supporting employment enabled a collective attitude in which hopelessness and a scarcity of ambition that was internalized by undereducated and

⁶³ Julien was part of the Sankofa Film Collective, a group of filmmakers who emerged from the Black British Film Workshop section in the early 1980s. As Coco Fusco describes, "Sankofa and Black Audio's intervention in British media institutions... have touched several raw nerves. Their insistence on shifting the terms of avant-garde film theory and practice to include an ongoing engagement with the politics of race sets them apart from long-standing traditions of documentary realism in British and Black film cultures" (306).

under-skilled black men. It positioned them as polar opposites to black men with college degrees who had access to the professional sector and material wealth like homes and automobiles. The characterization of Pierce and Wendell exemplify this increasing intra-racial gap between the working poor and the professional class.

My Brother's Wedding and *To Sleep with Anger* present ways in which different generations of black men are disconnected from a strong work ethic and attainable avenues to accumulate material wealth. A major observation Burnett made around this time the film was made was that things were

disappearing, sort of a cultural vacuum. Like there's not really a community anymore, everyone's kind of moving towards these materialistic values. And I wanted to talk about folklore and the old ways as having a strong influence once....Now people don't even know what it's about. But I think it's something they need, as a history or foundation." (Jones "A Conversation with Charles Burnett")

One factor to which this is attributed is that the offspring have no desire to emulate their parents, largely because they do not have the same access to jobs with family-supporting wages. The younger generation also found the values and customs of their elders irrelevant when it came to confronting matters of self-identity within and outside their community. Their indifference would distance them from their elders to the point where no customs or could transfer between younger and older blacks.

Each film's ability to place a primary focus on black working-class men is enabled by a spatial narration that allows for cinematic techniques to depict how multiple kinds of masculine identities are expressed and portray the factors that make them

distinct. Burnett's examples include the use of the long take in *The Horse* to reflect a slowly decaying system driven by the relationship between domination and dependency. He also uses handheld cinematography in *Several Friends* to capture the consequences that emerge from stagnant activity. Both strategies are utilized in *Killer of Sheep* to convey the disappointing outcomes of futile preparation and impulsive decision-making. Burnett uses these techniques in *My Brother's Wedding* to reveal the stagnated development of a character's self-identity and self-determination and how it complicates his ability to help a friend. Crosscutting is used more in *To Sleep with Anger* to unveil the clash between these different identities and how one threatens overpower the other.

The fourth chapter follows how Burnett's documentaries released in the 2000s, *Nat Turner: A Troublesome Property* and *Warming by the Devil's Fire*, incorporate spatial narration within an arrangement of dramatized historical moments, talking-head interviews, and archival photo stills and footage. The chapter will inquire what these multiple presentations of an individual and collective sense of self-identity reveal about these constructions and the legacies that inform the traditional masculine identity of the southern migrants. An aspect that complicates the utilization of this cultural memory is that in the case of Nat Turner, his narrative is produced by individual or multiple authors. *Nat Turner: A Troublesome Property* presents its title subject as a site of multiple presentations of masculine identity that responds to a historical situation. *Warming by the Devil's Fire* offers a variety of masculine identities that reflect responses towards preserving blues music. Both documentaries ultimately incorporate a historical context and an ongoing examination of black working-class men through blues music and continuing folkloric practices.

Chapter Four
Nat Turner: A Troublesome Property and Warming by the Devil's Fire—
The Restoration of Cultural Memory within a Masculine Identity

The fourth chapter focuses on the function of spatial narration within the documentary format in two films Charles Burnett directed in the early 2000s. *Nat Turner: A Troublesome Property* (2002) and *Warming by the Devil's Fire* (2004) are two cinematic treatments of African American history that examine the presentation and construction of a black masculine identity in a historical context. My analysis is most concerned about how the content of each film contributes to the cultural memory and history of black working-class men of succeeding generations in South Los Angeles. An important factor in this analysis is the way spatial narration allows for the multiple presentations of black working-class men within a 125-year period through interviews, historical dramatizations, archival film clips and photo stills. These strategies help explore how a black radical identity develops to liberate a people from the brutally oppressive system of slavery. This kind of identity also creates a space for characteristics of outrage, optimism, desire, and heartbreak that black men can express through blues music that a state of permanent captivity did not allow.

In both films, Burnett offers a treatment of history that bridges space and time through the topics of captive labor, control of one's identity, and physical and imaginative mobility. An understanding of how black men identified themselves in the early 1830s through the mid-1950s informs a dialogue about the black male characters Burnett presents in his fictional films from the 1960s through the 1990s. These factors help understand the legacy of migration and the construction of black working-class identity during and after slavery. These documentaries are neither set in nor do they

reference South Los Angeles, but they inform the identifying process of migrants who transition from the Jim Crow South to the Western metropolis.

Nat Turner: A Troublesome Property is most concerned with the construction and presentation of the masculine identity of the title subject as articulated by a variety of authors over nearly two centuries. The documentary traces the elusive story of Nat Turner (1800-1831), an enslaved laborer of the Turner plantation in Southampton County, VA, who led a slave rebellion that expanded to as many as eighty people. It resulted in the execution of plantation owners and their wives and children. Turner expressed that he received divine visions that inspired him to pursue the rebellion. He frames this moment as being called by “the Spirit” to “fight against the Serpent, for the time was fast approaching when the first should be last and the last should be first” (Gray 104). This can be read as the implementation of slavery throughout Southampton County. His self-identification as a prophet emerges from the internalization of biblical scriptures that inform the ability to recall moments prior to his birth.

Thomas R. Gray is the author of “The Confessions of Nat Turner,” the text from which the further interpretations are based. It is the initial formal document containing Turner’s descriptions of how he developed and carried out the slave rebellion that landed him in jail and led to his execution. Burnett explores the interpretations of Turner through five other authors who based their work on Gray’s account. This chapter examines the various interpretations that are presented as competing expressions and assessments of masculine self-identity that exemplify the use of spatial narration. The different interpretations are informed by the historical period in which the writer is describing Turner. Each has a clear objective for how he uses Turner to magnify the

imaginative and physical potential to conquer obstacles in a specific moment in time. Historical dramatizations based on each author's production of Turner's identity through his physical description and his linguistic choices. Burnett's use of spatial narration is further enhanced by his inclusion of interviews from scholars and writers. The interviews create a conversation where their ideas clash as much as they reinforce the elusiveness of the narrative and the purpose that Turner's legacy serves.

Spatial narration persists through *Warming by the Devil's Fire* by a narrative structure that includes a semi-autobiographical account of a boy and his blues musician uncle, along with archival film clips of blues music performances. The clips interspersed throughout the narrative are a supplementary function of the preservation of blues history that Buddy, the blues musician uncle, is conducting. Burnett uses his experiences as a boy traveling from Los Angeles to Mississippi to present the unifying and diverging qualities of blues and gospel music through each of his uncles. The boy spends a majority of time with Buddy, who intervenes in Junior's attempt to see his preacher uncle. The use of semi-autobiography magnifies the presence of landmarks significant to African Americans in the late 19th and early 20th century South that directly ties to blues music. The landmarks are accentuated through archival film clips and stills that situate the geographical location of the characters.⁶⁴ These clips of blues performers accentuate landmarks and offer meditations on the topics the artists sing about. All of the elements work collectively to frame blues music's contribution to the construction of black working-class masculinity in the film's spatial narration framework. Spatial narration

⁶⁴ These landmarks include Marie Laveau's tomb and the streets down which Buddy Bolden walked. Bolden came to prominence at the turn of the twentieth century when he began to play the cornet with his band throughout New Orleans, which is credited as one of the original sources of jazz (Marquis 105).

also presents the performance of blues music as a construction and expression of masculine identities responding to oppressive circumstances faced by black men.

Topics such as class disparity, gender conflict, and indifference between older and younger residents in Burnett's contemporary films determine a sense of masculine identity and self-determination that responds to these factors. The self-projections of these characters also respond to declining living-wage jobs and overall low expectations for a younger generation of black working-class men. Both documentaries serve as historical precedents within a larger cycle of stagnant labor opportunities for black men. *Nat Turner: A Troublesome Property* dates this cycle back to slavery in the early 19th century when Burnett illustrates Turner's strategy of forming a rebellion to dismantle the institution of slavery. Burnett points out in *Warming by the Devil's Fire* how the appearance of idle black men in the Jim Crow South gave law enforcement officers an excuse to sentence them to chain gangs to perform hard labor. The duration of this cycle in the South explains why migrants found it urgent to relocate to Los Angeles during World War II. This situation presents a tension in which one generation is unable to understand the other's experience of living under suppressive conditions. The themes in each film bridge a cultural memory that directly correlates to the topics Burnett explored in his earlier films. Both documentaries make an urgent case for the ability to tell and own one's story and to cultivate the outlet so that the story can be told effectively within the context of black cultural production. Another point is that the convergence of documentary and fictional conventions helps engage the audience into the legacy of slave insurrections and the blues music as an art form indigenous to African Americans. Both

subjects are cornerstones to a working-class identity for black men in South Los Angeles that directly ties to the central themes of Burnett's fictional films.

The Multiple Masculine Identities Projected through *Nat Turner: A Troublesome Property*

The spatial narration of *Nat Turner: A Troublesome Property* presents competing presentations of the title subject's masculine identity through the dramatization of multiple literary and theatrical interpretations, interviews with family members of plantation owners that Turner murdered, and scholars and writers who have done extensive work on Turner himself. Aside from different actors portraying Turner, the dramatization of each author's interpretation is captured on film in the same location and through the same cinematic conventions. The dramatizations use factual information to raise questions about the interrogation of authorship and the construction of cultural memory. The historical scope of the films begins in 1828, the point at which Turner's rebellion began. It spans to the period in which William Styron's novel about Nat Turner was released, the late 1960s. The balance between the dramatization of the author's interpretation and the interviews reflects the underlying tension between two kinds of accounts. One is a linear presentation of Turner's life that potentially raises doubts about his motives. Another is an oral folkloric account of the event that framed his rebellion as an urgent effort to dismantle the institution of slavery by any means.

The issue at stake is whether the eradication of history and memory suggests the eradication of identity and the ability of someone to tell their own story. *Nat Turner: A Troublesome Property* is more concerned with evaluating the expressions of masculine

self-identity that emerge from interpretations of Turner's confession that are either faithful to or challenge the presentation from Thomas R. Gray. He offers the only document that contains Turner's direct words. It opens up as many folkloric possibilities to heroicize him as it does potential condemnation for killing women and children during his insurrection. The documentary follows a three-part structure: the historical context of Turner's enslavement and the circulation of his story for nearly 140 years; the conflict over preserving Turner's legacy in the context of William Styron's novel; and the film's approach to the dramatization of these various images of Turner. Gray's purpose for documenting Turner's account is an initial inquiry that is raised. It is followed by another question about the stark conflict between Styron's novelization based on moments presented by Gray and the folkloric interpretations that read between the lines. These questions are embedded in an attempt to present multiple interpretations of Nat Turner's life without Burnett's own personal responses.

The documentary demands an unpacking of the term "troublesome property." It references the ownership of Turner as an enslaved laborer and the details that are circulated about him. The term also suggests a correspondence between the ownership of one's story and the ownership of one's identity. It centralizes the dichotomy between the oral circulation of folklore and the dissemination of formal accounts that follow a linear structure. The elusive facts in Turner's story invite a clash between the collective memory of folkloric practices and the linear history of published writings and the masculine identities each of them produce through Turner.

A central question this documentary raises is the extent to which Nat Turner's sense of masculine self-identity and self-determination can be documented when the

fundamental source comes from Gray, a local lawyer who framed the rebellion as a crime. Gray's account of Turner serves as a standard recollection from an amanuensis who records statements. Scholars Mary Kemp Davis and Thomas Parramore each address the natural fascination Gray had with Turner based on how he disclosed the information and the opportunity for him to gain a substantive income and relative notoriety. Davis insists that Gray had to find some fascination in Turner's motivation to lead an insurrection, while Parramore implies that Gray sought a dual purpose to share Turner's account to satisfy the public's right to know and pursue a profit by publishing his statements (*Nat Turner: A Troublesome Property*).⁶⁵ Following Gray's recording of how Turner described his rebellion, a bounty team was sent to execute people thought to have peripheral involvement in killing plantation owners throughout the area. The purpose of these actions were to further reinforce the presence and power of white supremacy throughout Southampton County and make an example out of Turner through his execution.

A responsiveness to signs from divine sources inspired by biblical texts are a central characteristic gathered in the presentation of Turner's masculine identity from Gray. Inquiries about how Turner implemented his rebellion can be legitimately understood in his exchange with Gray through multiple dramatizations. The film's dialogue comes directly from "The Confessions of Nat Turner." Low light is used in the space of a jail cell as Gray writes down Turner's response to his questions. Turner (Carl

⁶⁵ Parramore adds,

Nobody can, I think, say precisely why Thomas R. Gray went into the jail cell on November the first, 1831. It could be that he just wanted the public to know. He felt the public had a right to know what Nat Turner had done from Nat Turner's own point of view. It could be that he sought prestige after a great drop in his own reputability by going in and making himself as famous as he could by being Nat Turner's amanuensis, taking down what he said. He could've been thinking of the income he might derive. (*Nat Turner: A Troublesome Property*)

Lumbly) sits in the corner below the window and points outside to describe how he received a divine vision to pursue the insurrection:

TURNER: And on the 12th of May, 1828, I heard a loud noise in the heavens, and the Spirit instantly appeared to me and said the Serpent was loosened, and Christ had laid down the yoke he had borne for the sins of men, and that I should take it on and fight against the Serpent, for the time was fast approaching when the first should be last and the last should be first.

GRAY: Do you find yourself mistaken now?

TURNER: Was not Christ crucified? And by signs in the heavens that it would make known to me when I should commence the great work—and until the first sign appeared, I should conceal it from the knowledge of men. (Gray 104)

Gray (Tom Nowicki) speaks directly to the camera shortly thereafter and shares factual information about the insurrection. Responses to Gray's text from interviews are interspersed, expressing doubts about whether or not Gray's presentation is accurate through the dialogue and the account of the events.

Other scholars describe the elusive nature of the narrative as a form of spatial narration that clearly positions Gray and Turner in the dichotomy of an authoritative white man as a law enforcer and an enslaved black man as a criminal. Vincent Harding best articulates the ambivalent response to the only available text of Turner's words: "It is very clear by now that we cannot take Nat Turner's confessions at face value, but it is also very clear that we cannot cast it aside" (*Nat Turner: A Troublesome Property*). Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s remarks about the elusiveness of Turner's story further reinforce Harding's observations: "There is no Nat Turner back there, whole, to be retrieved. You

would have to go and create Nat Turner. We have a fragmented, disjointed narrative.” (Burnett, *Nat Turner: A Troublesome Property*). Both of these comments on the elusiveness of Gray’s account point to the imaginative possibilities of crafting Turner’s image, for better or worse. They also point to the ways in which Turner’s dialogue is appropriated through different moments of history in which migration and working-class identity are immersed. The convergence of these dramatizations with these scholarly observations offers a unique correlation to the film’s title. Turner’s sentiments and subsequent actions would certainly render him “a troublesome property”; yet the way in which the writers and scholars are featured in the film by the filmmaker offers a responsible treatment of a text whose reliability attracts a great amount of scrutiny.

The two significant interpretations of Turner that suggest differing presentations of his masculine identity greatly informed a generation of critics who would raise numerous questions about Styron’s portrayal of the insurrection leader. One dramatization comes directly from the abolitionist William Wells Brown.⁶⁶ The scene in the film excerpted from Brown’s *The Black Man, His Antecedents, His Genius, and His Achievements* is when he gives a speech to a group of rebels at Cabin Pond and instructs them on how the rebellion would be carried out:

Our race is to be delivered from slavery, and God has appointed us as the men to do his bidding, and let us be worthy of our calling. I am told to slay all the whites we encounter, without regard to age or sex. We have no arms or ammunition, but we will find them in the houses of our oppressors, and as we go on others can join

⁶⁶ William Wells Brown was an abolitionist born of an enslaved woman and a relative of her owner. His abolitionist efforts date as far back to 1836, when he took part in the Western New York Anti-Slavery Society in Buffalo, NY. After he came to know Frederick Douglass in the 1840s, his writing began in 1847 with his autobiography *Narrative of William W. Brown*. (Garrett and Robbins xxi).

us. Remember that we do not go forth for the sake of blood and carnage, but it is necessary that in the commencement of this revolution all the whites we meet should die, until we shall have an army strong enough to carry on the war upon a Christian basis. (64)

Brown follows with a documentation of the events that is generally consistent with Gray's account, though adding information about the events that led up to Turner's execution. Brown's concluding remarks further substantiate the polarization between the whites who condemn him for murdering women and children, and blacks who felt that they were in such a desperate that murdering anyone who stood in the way was collateral damage in the path towards freedom. Brown's interpretation suggests a masculine sense of self-identity that responds to the systematic efforts used to suppress slave rebellions. This expression is also informed by the historical context of the period during the Civil War. Brown's 1863 text presents Turner in a lineage of revered African-American men.

Brown's account of Turner is important because he frames the narrative as a model for his fellow abolitionists to follow in dismantling slavery. The importance of Turner's story lies in the example it provides to persevere and resist against oppressive conditions. The account of Turner also documents the extremes to which plantation owners went to prevent further attempts to subvert the hierarchy of economic, social, and political power. Riche Richardson compares Turner with Denmark Vesey, who was responsible for leading a slave revolt in Charleston, South Carolina in 1822. Like Turner, Vesey argued that his faith and the divine insight that accompanied it is what inspired him to lead the revolt. Richardson outlines the swift and brutal ways in which plantation

owners responded to slave rebellions with punishments ranging from lynching to mutilation to aggressively discourage further attempts (31-32). She adds:

The stories of Vesey and Turner quintessentially defined resistance during the antebellum era and forged the notion of the “rebel slave” in American cultural history, as would former slave Frederick Douglass in his vivid recounting of the confrontation with the notoriously cruel white slavebreaker Covey in his 1845 slave narrative *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. (Richardson 31-32).

The fact that Turner’s story was used as an intimidation tactic did not ultimately deter its folkloric capacities in terms of how it circulated to black people for nearly a century and a half. The conflict of whether or not Turner was delusional or divinely inspired begins with Gray’s presentation of his exchange prior to the trial.

Comparable to William Wells Brown’s treatment of Turner, Sterling Brown’s poem, “Remember Nat Turner,” presents how Turner’s rebellion is a vital part of the African-American collective memory.⁶⁷ The stanza below provides an account of the path of Turner’s insurrection:

As we drove from Cross Keys back to Courtland,
Along the way that Nat came down upon Jerusalem,
We wondered if his troubled spirit still roamed the Nottaway,
Or if it fled with the cock-crow at daylight,

⁶⁷ Sterling Brown was a poet and a professor of English at Howard University from 1929 through 1969. John Edgar Tidwell and Steven C. Tracy describe Brown as “also a public intellectual. He spent time writing for various journals, serving as Editor of Negro Affairs for the Federal Writers Project, working with the Carnegie-Myrdal Study of the Negro project, celebrating and analyzing folklore as a collector, writer, and emcee, and championing or chastening literature by and about African Americans in proportion to its principled presentation and literary quality” (4).

Or lay at peace with bones in Jerusalem,
 Its restlessness stifled by Southampton clay.
 We remember the poster rotted through and falling
 The marker split for kindling a kitchen fire. (411-412)

Brown's poem identifies specific locations in the Southampton County region to situate the reader on the path Turner and the rebels pursued. The author's handling of the details seeks to humanize Turner in a way that supplements his heroicism, which situates the reader to understand his struggles to dismantle slavery.

The Great Depression was another historical era in which the interpretation of Nat Turner was directly tied to expressions of masculine self-identity. When the documentary shifts to this period in the twentieth century, it concentrates on sharecroppers who were interviewed by staff from the Works Progress Administration. The staff interviewed Allen Crawford, a 102-year-old sharecropper who still resided in Southampton County. The film's dramatization shows Crawford identifying Turner's mistress's house as the first place he went after the rebels killed their first family. Another recollection is found in Daniel Crofts' history of Southampton County, where Crawford recalls hearing that Turner hid at the Edwards' farm, where he [Turner] was struck in the mouth by the grandmother of a member in his rebellion that died during the insurrection (Crofts 20). Crawford's account reflects the importance of folklore, in which details not presented in Gray's official document of Nat Turner's confessions are circulated by word of mouth.

Randolph Edmonds's 1937 theatrical treatment of Nat Turner emerged after the Great Depression.⁶⁸ His treatment of Turner emerges closest to the beginning of the migration of African Americans from the Southeast to the West. Edmonds's presentation of the character Nat Turner is the only interpretation that takes place outside of the exterior location used throughout the film. Burnett presents Edmonds's interpretation of Turner as a stage production. Edmonds's purpose was to write the play specifically to introduce the legacy of Turner to high school and university audiences. Edmonds portrays Turner's insurrection as a spiritually determined endeavor that sought to dismantle the institution of slavery. Turner explains his divine justification for carrying out the mission in his initial exchanges with the rebellion:

NAT: De sperit revealed dis tuh me: dat tu-night is de best possible time tu start dis insurrection. Most ob de white folks is gone over in North Ca'lina, tuh Winton and Murfeesboro, tuh tend de big meetings. Dat only leaves a few around; and dey won't bother us 'cause dey is so far apart. Even now dey things we is away having a meeting ob our own. We can kill dese few white folks, organize all de slaves in a large army and take Jeresulum, de county seat, git all de guns and ammunitions. We can den counquer the whole county, march tuh de Dismal Swamp, and work frum dere. Soon we can overcome de whole state, den de whole country lak George Washington did from de British. (93-94)

Turner places their insurrection in the same context as battles fought in various points in the Bible in this scene. He also situates their efforts in the same context as George Washington's fight for America's independence.

⁶⁸ Randolph Edmonds was a playwright who taught at Dillard University in New Orleans while writing the play about Turner. Gates and Higginbotham explain that Edmonds "portrays the leader of the 1831 armed slave revolt as a religious visionary motivated by humanitarian concerns" (170-171).

The film shows a performance of the play's conclusion. The wife of one of Turner's followers watches her husband die from gunshot wounds and condemns Turner as a beast. He responds in the following monologue:

NAT: A beast! She called me a beast! Ef Ah's a beast, who made me one? Ef dey buy and sell me, whip me lak dawgs, and feed me dere leavin's how can Ah be nothin' else be a beast. How can dey blame me ef Ah turns on dem and rend dem? [Looking down at JESSEE.] Jessee's daid. A few minutes ago he was in dis world groaning with misery. Hank is captured, and dere ain't no army. What is Ah gwine to do now, Lahd? (Edmonds 103).

Burnett uses two medium shots to capture the exchange that leads to the monologue.

Turner (Tommy Redmond Hicks) is confronted with the ambivalent attitudes of his followers and his family members now that a few are either dead or have been captured. Edmonds utilizes language that pertains more to how enslaved Africans were expected to talk, a departure from the dialect Gray uses to interpret Turner. Turner responds to being called a beast by pointing out the treatment of him and other enslaved Africans as inhuman property as opposed to hired laborers. Edmonds does not conclude with Turner's capture and execution. The rest of the passage shows an invigorated Turner determined to continue his insurrection after Jessee's death. The continuous references to the Bible further substantiate his portrayal as a freedom fighter guided by the divine spirit to liberate enslaved people. It portrays deep religious engagement as informing Turner's sense of masculine self-identity his strategic pursuit towards organizing his rebellion.

William Styron's interpretation of Nat Turner includes an expression of masculinity as an overbearingly repressed desire to express emotional or sexual passion.⁶⁹ The determination of whether or not folkloric accounts of Turner were more reliable than Gray's official published account persisted through the debate of Styron's portrayal of the insurrection leader. African American literary critics in particular pointed out multiple discrepancies between their personal engagement with Turner and Styron's account. The documentary takes a self-reflexive turn when Burnett discusses the filmmaking process. He inquires whether or not the objective stances of the filmmakers presenting these interpretations serve as an interpretation itself. Burnett discloses in an interview in the latter part of the film that his challenge is to present these interpretations as objectively as possible without offering his own analysis. A subsequent question to pose is if Burnett's interpretation of these authors' illustrations of Turner stands as its own presentation of a masculine identity. A set of questions that follow include Burnett's own engagement with Nat Turner and why he feels Turner's story is important in the early twenty-first century.

The overall prose of Styron's novel demonstrates his attempt to assume the agency of an enslaved black man. In the transfer of details from Gray's initial text to Styron's novel, sexual passion stands as the driving force of the murders produced by the insurrection as opposed to Turner's strategic dismantling of the institution of slavery.

The purpose for African Americans was to make Turner a heroic figure who sacrificed

⁶⁹ William Styron explains how James Baldwin inspired him to write *The Confessions of Nat Turner* in the first person:

Jimmy Baldwin moved into my house here in Connecticut in the winter of 1960. By this time, I was boiling to write the book, and I think it was he who encouraged me more than anyone else to seize the idea of the first person and to plunge into that kind of narrative mode. Because he himself had already begun to deal with the idea of writing about white people from an intimate point of view. He said, "What you should do, as a white writer, is to be bold and take on the persona of a black man, Nat Turner. (Burnett, *Nat Turner: A Troublesome Property*)

his life in the attempt to end slavery. Styron's approach towards displaying the dehumanizing aspects of this institution was met with scrutiny for two reasons. Critics argued that Styron's dialogue for Turner was inconsistent with the dialect an enslaved person would use, namely because the expression of any kind of literacy could lead to an inevitable death. In addition, Styron's interpretation of Turner appeared to be removed from any relevancy to the sociopolitical climate of the 1960s.

Prior to the film's transition to Styron's novel, Burnett considers the period between the Great Depression to its release in 1967. The mid-1960s marked a turning point that would prompt a debate as to which strategy black liberation activists should follow. Engaged parties weighed how Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s inclination to converse about the basic human rights of black citizens among civic leaders positioned alongside the Black Power ideology of embodying self-sufficiency and pursuing self-determination modeled after Malcolm X. The latter sought to build an alliance between black people in the United States with African nations that wanted to obtain independence from European colonizers. This ideological shift occurred while Styron was writing the book; he mentions in the documentary that he started the book around the time Dr. King delivered his speech at the March on Washington in August of 1963. The book was released once Black Power ideology had become internalized among the larger black public.

Styron faced objections against his use of creative license to depict the relationship between Turner and a white female character named Margaret Whitehead. She was the daughter of a family for whom Turner had performed some duties. The novel presents the Whitehead family as responsible for teaching Turner how to read, a

detail highly contested after the book's release. The following passage exhibits how Styron presents their exchange as a budding friendship that increases with romantic potential:

Although as brief and fleeting as the space of a blink, it was the longest encounter I could remember ever having with a white person's eyes. Unaccountably, my heart swelled in my throat in a quick ball of fear. I turned away, swept with lust again, hating her guts, now driven close to distraction by that chattering monologue pitched at a girlish whisper which I no longer bothered to listen or to understand. (372)

Two dramatized scenes in the film further illustrate their exchanges. The first scene shows Turner and Margaret walking through the woods together. Nat is depicted staring at her while she talks. His internal dialogue describes her physical attributes. The scene in film references the above passage.

A later scene shows Nat chasing Margaret through the woods. He corners her and stabs her when she is unable to escape. He ultimately kills her with a blow from a stick. A collective of critics who identified themselves as the Ten Black Writers not only addressed this as a historical inaccuracy, but a suspicion about whether Styron was reinforcing stereotypes about black men having uncontrollable sexual feelings toward white women.⁷⁰ Richardson's examination of black masculinity in the South incorporates a description of how the myth of the black rapist was circulated:

⁷⁰ The Ten Black Writers were a collective of black scholars and literary critics who wrote responses to Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner*. The authors were Lerone Bennett, Jr., Alvin F. Poussaint, M.D., Vincent Harding, John Oliver Killens, John A. Williams, Ernest Kaiser, Loyle Hairston, Charles V. Hamilton, Mike Thelwell, and the collection's editor, John Henrik Clarke.

It was a myth that cast black men as sexually pathological, hyperbolized their phallic power, and construed themes inherently lustful and primitive. It was rooted in the growing panic about intermixture in the South that emerged after slavery ended, [and it] reflected that region's obsession with protecting white womanhood to ensure the purity of the race, and served as a primary rationale for lynching in the region. (4)

Styron's attempt to give an elusive figure such as Turner human dimensions was thought by his critics as a reinforcement of the black buck stereotype. Turner's murder of Margaret Whitehead does not involve sexual consummation in the process, but indifferent opinions expressed outrage by what they read as Turner committing rape in the form of murder. These critics accuse Styron of both perpetuating a stereotype that justifies lynching and suggesting that he was inspired to start his insurrection out of an uncontrollable romantic passion.

Styron's decision to write the novel in the first person presented some problems to African American literary and cultural critics. Many of them questioned whether or not a white male author was the right person to write from the perspective of an enslaved black man in charge of a slave insurrection. The documentary presents a sharp divide between Styron's antagonists and defenders. Figures such as novelist and literary critic Mike Thelwell and actor/director Ossie Davis assert that Styron emasculated a central hero and played to the anxieties whites had about black men. White scholars like Eugene Genovese and Peter Wood argue that Styron's interpretation of Turner was consistent with Gray's account and offered a more imaginative version of about the time that led up to the days of the insurrection. Styron's novel raises the question of whether or not his

approach undermines the tradition of the slave narrative and undermines the importance of the marker “written by himself/herself.”

Slave narratives such as *Narrative of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave, Written by Himself* (1845), Harriet Wilson’s *Our Nig* (1859), and Harriet Jacobs’s *Incident in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) exemplify how enslaved Africans had the intellectual capacity to tell their own stories. The ability for enslaved people to articulate their experiences attracted major skepticism since Phillis Wheatley’s first poems were published. The ten black writers published a collection of critical essays that discussed the shortcomings of Styron’s novel. Thelwell directly addresses the voice Styron assigns Turner in his response to the novel after its release:

Since he lacks the idiom in which Nat might communicate intimately with his peers, Styron simply avoids the problem by having Nat spend most of his life in that paradoxical, typically southern situation, close to but isolated from whites.... Styron’s Nat Turner, the house nigger, is certainly not the emotional or psychological prototype rebellious slave: he is the spiritual ancestor of the contemporary middle-class Negro, that is to say the Negro type with whom whites including Mr. Styron feel most comfortable. (82)

Thelwell’s condemning assessment of Styron’s novel reflects how the ten black writers collectively point to the conflict between linear writings of a historical figure with no concrete information, and the folkloric transfer of a hero who fought aggressively against a brutally oppressive system through any means he could. It also raises the question as to whether Styron’s authorial voice actually isolates Turner from other black characters in the novel. This question produces a lingering concern as to whether it also isolates

Turner from the collective cultural memory of African Americans that spans over a century.

Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Eugene Genovese have come to Styron's defense for his portrayal of Turner. Genovese substantiates Styron's claim that he wanted to present human dimensions to a figure who prompted reservations among white Americans. He finds the author's portrayal of the relationship between Turner and Whitehead as the ideal platform to convey the title character's sensibilities. Gates directly responds to Styron's critics when he states, "If you don't like Bill Styron's version, make your own" (Burnett, *Nat Turner: A Troublesome Property*). He expands on his statement by emphasizing the importance of why multiple interpretations of Turner's confessions to Thomas Gray are important because they reflect a particular moment in which Turner's life is re-examined.

Illustrations are also incorporated with dramatized interpretations and interviews to establish the film's historical context. These images present how Turner may have looked prior to his execution. They also include how he may have addressed members of his rebellion. A painting by James McGee, a current resident of Southampton County, marks the transitional point into the third section. McGee describes himself as someone who uses visual art to communicate ancestral messages as opposed to an artist. His painting "On the Road to Jerusalem" is presented as a folkloric expression that pays a debt to Turner and members of his insurrection.

The importance of *Nat Turner: A Troublesome Property* is that it constructs a lineage between the early nineteenth through the mid-twentieth centuries to magnify how slavery informs expressions of a masculine self-identity that desires to destroy an oppressive institution. Oral folkloric practices were vital to the writings of Douglass,

Jacobs, and Wilson. Their narratives offer an insight into the physical and psychological struggles endured by enslaved people. Their collective purpose was to disrupt the conventional wisdom that landowning whites promoted to justify why people of African descent were meant to become an enslaved labor force. Such reasons included their incapability to engage in any basic intellectual activity or standard comprehension. An enslaved laborer who wrote about his or her experiences became an important part of the abolitionist movement by directly challenging these claims of intellectual incompetence. The circulation of historical information through oral and printed transfer is a major conflict at the center of *Nat Turner: A Troublesome Property*. Questions are raised as to whether increased accessibility to Turner's life and legacy retains or surrenders his historical significance.

Each of Burnett's documentaries confronts the way the lynching epidemic was spawned by the myth of the black rapist who sought to sexually violate white women. Richardson recounts the circulation of black caricatures in American popular culture to conceal the brutal lynching and mutilation of black men throughout the South:

These representations frequently recuperated and romanticized images of the plantation South. They revealed the prevailing view of the black body in the white Southern imagination demonstrated, the abject status of blacks within the nation more broadly, and served as reinforcement for characterizations that had already begun to gain widespread popularity during the antebellum era. (24)

This recuperation and romanticization was vital for the landowning whites to restore power at the top of the political and social hierarchy after the abolition of slavery diminished their wealth and influence. D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915)

illustrates the threat of black male sexuality that landowning whites used to haunt the collective imagination of white Americans. The most cited scene that exemplifies this notion is when a black Union soldier named Gus (portrayed by Walter Long, a white actor) decides to take advantage of the integration of blacks in Southern society after the Civil War and propose to Daisy who is the younger sister of Ben Cameron, the film's hero who founds the Ku Klux Klan to counter the increasing presence of blacks in the South in Griffith's revisionist treatment of history. Daisy flees from Gus immediately after he proposes, and he chases her to assure that he will not hurt her. She comes to a cliff and threatens to throw herself over if Gus does not turn away. Daisy then falls to her death after she decides he will not leave her alone.

Richardson's earlier quote shows that black male sexuality was manipulated into an uncontrollable threat for which the only solution was the physical dismantling of the black male body. This sentiment amplified the urgency of an outlet black men could use to fight this conventional wisdom. The former plantation owners established a rationale that was an obvious attempt to contain people of African descent within two polarizing images: the minstrel image illustrates black people who are compliant to white aristocratic domination at exhausting levels, and the physically threatening image of the black buck possesses a violent level of sexuality that in some cases must be contained by death. This climate produced a demand for black men to use blues music as an outlet to express their fear, rage, and sexual desires that demanded mutual consummation as opposed to violent domination.

The blues musician had an established outlet to express deep emotional vulnerability and convey sexual desires as a source for both gratification and

complication. He would cultivate his craft and content in the face of these lynching epidemics that spanned from the 1890s through the 1930s. He played an important role in the period after the abolition of slavery and the excessive attempts to physically contain black men. Blues and gospel music both emerge from African American folklore and are sources for tracing the ability of black people to survive enslavement and the transition out of it. Blues music is an outcome of how formerly enslaved people of African descent grasped their own understanding of the English language to express their emotional shifts between pleasure and pain. The historical landscape that informs early blues music ranges from the period shortly after the Emancipation Proclamation through the initial years of the Industrial Revolution in urban areas. Amiri Baraka describes the post-Emancipation years as the “metaphysical Jordan of life after death...replaced by the more pragmatic Jordan of the American master: the Jordan of what the ex-slave could see as self-determination” (Jones, *Blues People* 63). The notion of self-determination was driven by deep emotional vulnerability that had been long repressed. The failure of Reconstruction and the implementation of Jim Crow laws in the late nineteenth century would deal a tremendous blow to African Americans seeking citizenship. This situation would become a more vital reason for why blues music was needed to withstand increasingly oppressive actions.

Warming by the Devil's Fire: Artistry as an Expression of Masculine Identity and Preserver of Cultural Memory

Warming by the Devil's Fire contains conventions such as dramatized semi-autobiography and archival photos and film footage to establish blues music as an

expression of masculinity. Limited opportunities to earn a living and oppressive implementation of governmental policies framed the way these men could articulate their struggles through music. The structure of the film is segmented into four parts. It contains a prelude that establishes the immediate legacy of slavery within the Jim Crow South. Early portions of the film use archival footage to create the sense of a physical urban landscape and to mark the sharp shift between a rural space dominated by vast farmland and lynched bodies, and an urban space with streetcars and automobiles. The transition introduces Junior and Buddy through their drive from New Orleans to Jackson. The drive itself consist of long shots of roads, forests, and bodies of water that further mark the shift from urban to rural. Buddy and Junior are shown at the Gulf of Mexico in a wide shot at one point. Buddy refers to it as freedom because as he puts it, “You can’t pick cotton from the ocean.” Buddy’s fascination with this body of water lies at the heart of what inspires blues musicians: the unlimited capacity of one’s imagination contrasted with the inaccessibility of resources that enable the escape from an oppressive situation. The final part of the film finds Buddy taking Junior to a juke joint. Buddy’s preacher brother, Phil, finds him and Junior there and takes their nephew away.

Buddy’s conflict between his obligation to preserve the history of the blues and his impulse to find an outlet for a good time stands at the center of how he presents his masculine identity. The young Junior displays obedience as his central characteristic, and Buddy sees it as his duty to disrupt it. These sections of the documentary are intertwined with a voiceover from an adult Junior. His voice shifts from describing the action as an adult to reenacting these moments as if he were still eleven years old. He offers a straightforward account of blues performers as the film’s principal narrator to

complement the archival stills and film footage. These performances are prominently featured to reference landmarks Buddy points out as he guides his nephew through the Gulf Coast. The blues performances either supplement Buddy's and Junior's journey or they become a musical meditation in and of itself throughout the narrative. The structure is designed to illustrate Buddy's twofold mission in picking up Junior: to instill in him a knowledge and appreciation of the blues and reveal to his nephew what he is being saved from prior to his baptism. The knowledge of the blues that reflects one's ability to survive directly informs Buddy's presentation of his masculine identity.

Blues music was rooted in and developed after the Reconstruction. It became the first art form indigenous to African Americans who were enslaved at some point. The music would demonstrate their ability to communicate their creative and emotional landscape in a way that they could not do while enslaved. African Americans had to adjust to living in an urban, industrial-driven environment during the Great Migration to the Northeast and the Midwest in the early twentieth century. Blues music was used to communicate their psychological and emotional transformation as they were transitioning into new experiences, new geographies, and a new access to personal autonomy.

Blues music serves as a source for both tracing one's indigenous identity and adjusting to life after captivity in ways that other forms of African American folklore have demonstrated. It is the result of enslaved Africans grasping the English language to articulate their own emotions that wildly shift between pleasure and pain. The Emancipation Proclamation marks the moment when enslaved people could begin to see a life for themselves after slavery. To return to a notion of self-determination would become possible once musicians were able to express moments of deep emotional

vulnerability that had been long repressed. The failure of Reconstruction and the implementation of Jim Crow laws in the late 19th century was a tremendous blow to the citizenship of African Americans. The inability to escape such an oppressive climate informed the songs of blues musicians.

The documentary's prelude establishes a context of how Jim Crow laws were implemented in the South. This climate determined the extent to which a black man could control his own identity without subordinating to a white man. It begins with a series of stills that includes a boy walking with a horse and a plow. The image transforms into another of a man performing the same kind of work. The dissolve edit of a photo of a child into a one of a man illustrates the cyclical nature of stagnant labor opportunities. It follows with shots of black men working on a chain gang and in a cotton field picking bales. Each scenario has a white man monitoring them with a rifle resting on his shoulder. Another series of shots begin with a shadow of a lynched body over a still picture of a white audience. It follows with a set of dead black bodies hanging from a bridge while white onlookers surround them. The last image before transitioning into the narrative is a close medium shot of a woman who has been lynched. This prelude establishes the climate of racial terror that existed in states like Louisiana and Mississippi. The lynching epidemic informed the working conditions of African American residents who were limited to sharecropping and domestic work. The montage of images that lead to Junior's arrival in New Orleans situates the urban space as not far from the geographical and ideological rural space. Junior's trip from Los Angeles to New Orleans and Jackson takes place a year after the murder of Emmitt Till.

The opening montage also presents the harsh realities that informed the songs of blues musicians. Buddy points Junior to the Dockery Plantation at a later moment in the film. Dockery was a cotton plantation and sawmill said to be the birth of the Mississippi Delta blues because musicians such as Charley Patton and Sam Chatmon once worked there.⁷¹ Songs from each of these singers is intercut with the narrative. Their songs would recall the intensive working conditions of the plantation and provide an insight into the emotional interiority of a black laborer. The generation of migrants who relocated to Los Angeles after World War II retained their appreciation for blues music because they could identify with the kind of labor on southern plantations in these songs from their work in the plants and shipyards.

The adult Junior inherits Buddy's commitment to preserving the history of the blues as a central characteristic of his masculine identity. The beginning of the narrative is where Junior's voiceover as an adult begins. The voice over functions in two ways: to describe feelings Junior had when encountering what Buddy wanted to show him, and to present information about early 20th century blues musicians and African American history. The film's semiautobiographical narrative is shot in digital video and maintains a consistent look throughout its duration. Interspersed in the narrative is footage that ranges from grainy black-and-white to optically printed images. The combination of this footage with archival still pictures is used to establish the geographical landscape. It begins with blues performers and continues with footage of a train station. It transitions

⁷¹ Joe Dockery, the inheritor of Dockery Plantation in Cleveland, MS, became responsive to the role the location played in being home to the Delta Blues by acknowledging the inquiries of music historians. As Ted Gioia notes, "The son eventually became reconciled to his family's role in the history of the Delta blues—but just barely. Joe Dockery would host, with patrician grace, researchers such as Robert Palmer, Gayle Wardlow, and Stephen Calt, answering their questions and putting his family property and tenants at their disposal" (47).

to an image of the boy who the audience comes to know as Junior. The image shifts from black-and-white to color. These early moments convey Junior's anxiety when Buddy detours him from heading to his baptism to "get saved." One of the first moments of Junior's music education is when Buddy takes him to Congo Square in New Orleans, which was the space where property owners brought enslaved Africans to play their indigenous music. Baraka offers the following description of this space:

This kind of gathering in Congo Square was usually the only chance Negroes had to sing and play at length. And of course, even this was supervised by the local authorities: the slaves were brought to the square and brought back by their masters. Still, the Congo Square sessions were said to have included many African songs that were supposedly banned by the whites for being part of the vodun or voodoo rites. (Jones, *Blues People*⁷²)

The reference to Congo Square establishes Buddy's desire to illuminate the African roots of blues music. The camera captures Buddy walking through Congo Square in one shot in a fixed camera position to elevate its status as a monument.

Burnett also uses the décor of the mise-en-scène to amplify how Buddy's commitment to blues music and culture is central to his masculine identity. A young Junior enters Buddy's residence and notices that it is a shotgun house. His adult voice describes it as the standard living quarters for a blues musician in terms of size and shape. He adds that it serves as a makeshift museum for blues memorabilia because of the posters and flyers for live blues performances and Buddy's 78" collection, which is scattered throughout his home. Junior's voiceover serves as a more formal version of Buddy's role as a historian in this part of the sequence. It becomes more evident when

his uncle plays “Precious Memories” by Sister Rosetta Tharpe. The adult Junior talks about her transfer between blues and gospel as the song plays. Her profile leads to a montage of other women blues singers that include archival stills and clips of performances that include Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Sister Rosetta Tharpe.⁷² Tharpe and Smith faced the same tensions in their balance between gospel and music.⁷³ This inclusion of women who sang blues music points to the increasing commerciality of blues music. Rainey’s experience in vaudeville granted them access to accomplished songwriters and musicians that would help them write songs to catapult their success. She was able to maintain her popularity and sell records consistently during the Great Depression. The few women singers in blues music were some of the first marquee performers of blues music. They would gain more popularity as blues music became more professionalized through the shift from small and obscure to major venues.

An earlier mention of the individual characteristics that distinguish the masculine identities of Junior and Buddy reemerges when the uncle takes his nephew to a woman’s

⁷² Melanie Bratcher identifies Bessie Smith’s recognition of gender-driven power relations as the basis for her songs and overall performance:

Smith’s creativity source came to life as she thought more expansively about the true nature of power relations between the oppressed and the oppressor. Conviction began to bubble and fester. She realized that the strength it takes to state the facts come through virtuosity of expression. Her source of creativity came from a place where rage met with empowerment. Her process reached a climax—she was virtually both complainant and redeemer. (103)

In her description of Ma Rainey’s initial performance spaces that range from circuses, tent shows, minstrel and medicine shows, Angela Davis explains that her “most essential social accomplishment was to keep poor Black people grounded in the Southern tradition of unity and struggle, even when they had migrated to the North and Midwest in search of economic security” (225).

⁷³ Gayle Wald offers this explanation of Sister Rosetta Tharpe’s transition from gospel to secular music: From Cotton Plant to the Cotton Club. The juxtaposition of the racially and socially stratified Arkansas town of Rosetta’s birth with the racially and socially stratified New York nightclub where she debuted was more than a little ironic, considering that the entertainment concept behind the latter was the antebellum plantation of ‘Swanee River’ nostalgia. Yet the image of bucolic slavery was precisely the source of the Cotton Club’s charm. (35)

house for breakfast. Junior ventures from the home of a woman who Buddy is courting to visit a nearby church. It is a point in the film where he explores the way faith helps construct the expression of one's male identity. Archival footage and audio creates a physical space in which it appears that Junior is participating in a church service. The voice of a preacher describing a blues singer entering his church with a guitar over his shoulder appears once Junior gets closer to the church. It follows with an optically printed image of parishioners filing into the church. Shots are cut between the pew Junior sits in and the empty pews of the church accompanied by the voices of the preacher and parishioners. The camera shows Junior taking his seat amidst cutaways to the members of the congregation listening to the sermon. Burnett edits with a shot/reverse shot pattern between Junior and the congregants. One of them includes a little boy sleeping. The action also cuts back and forth between Junior and an optically printed image of the preacher delivering the sermon about the hypocritical habits of Christians. The choir follows with a musical selection to which Junior stands up and claps along to the music. This scene exemplifies how the manipulation of archival footage creates a tangible environment when the literal space does not do so.

Warming by the Devil's Fire contains self-reflexive moments when one of the characters seeks to document ways in which black men use blues music to express a masculine identity that they control. It aligns closely with Burnett's objective as a filmmaker. Junior comes to learn that Buddy is writing a book about the history of blues music. Buddy seeks to establish the historical lineage of the blues between the post-antebellum South and African instruments. An adult Junior situates Buddy's project in a larger landscape of African American history with notable figures such as Frederick

Douglass, W.E. B. Du Bois, and Ida B. Wells. Douglass, Du Bois, and Wells share a collective mission to speak out and act against lynching and forms of racial terror that seeks to suppress African Americans. It creates a direct tie to the lynching references Burnett makes at the beginning of the film. The adult Junior furthers Buddy's objective to tie the blues to its African roots by explaining the relationship between the guitar and the African instrument the *gojé*.⁷⁴

The adult Junior shifts the focus from African history to the moment when blues sheet music was first published. He identifies W.C. Handy as the first blues musician to begin this practice.⁷⁵ Junior explains that Handy established a publishing company because he wanted to be in control of the money he earned. The film transitions into a dramatization of Handy listening to a man at a train station in Mississippi performing a blues song on his guitar. It is said that this moment inspired Handy to write "Yellow Dog Blues." This moment follows with another series of stills that are accompanied with an audio track that features Handy's actual voice. He explains that his song "Beale Street Blues" was written the night he passed a barber shop on that street in Memphis. This focus on Handy maintains a direct correspondence with Buddy and his brother, Phil, as Handy's desire to pursue music and his rejection to become a preacher like his father

⁷⁴ The *gojé* is a one-stringed fiddle from the West Central Sudanic Belt that closely resembles the guitar. It is most significant for its "predominance of pentatonic turning patterns, the absence of the concept of asymmetric time-line patterns, a relatively simple motional structure lacking complex polyrhythm but using subtle off-beat accents, and a declamatory vocal style with wavy intonation, melisma, raspy voices, heterophony, and so on" (Kubik 63).

⁷⁵ W.C. Handy was one of the first blues composers to begin publishing his music. David Robertson points out some of Handy's early problems:

Handy consequently made the worst business decision of his life. He sold his claim to the copyright to "The Memphis Blues or (Mr. Crump)" for fifty dollars. The buyer was Theron Catlin Bennett. A white music publisher with connections in New York City, Bennett (1897-1937) was a Missouri native and a popular ragtime composer, and, like Handy, had an ear for folk and street music. Indeed, Bennett's musical career might be considered almost a parody of Handy's later artistic accomplishments and ambitions. (133)

resembles the conflict between Buddy and Phil within the narrative. Each of these men provides Junior with a body of knowledge that he will find valuable in spite of their personal conflict.

The film's discussion of Handy points to class distinctions and subsequent access to resources as a distinguishing characteristic of one's masculine identity and his ability to interpret others. Handy had access to formal training and the avenues to publish and perform music that the blues musician he is shown listening to did not have. Handy's presentation of blues music and song lyrics is comparable to the use of the vernacular by poets such as Sterling Brown and Paul Laurence Dunbar. As Baraka explains:

Classic blues is called "classic" because it was the music that seemed to contain all the diverse and conflicting elements of Negro music plus the smoother emotional appeal of the "performance." It was the first Negro music that appeared in formal context as entertainment, though it contained the harsh, uncompromising reality of the earlier blues forms. (Jones, *Blues People* 87)

Baraka adds that blues music marked a moment in which black people saw themselves as participatory citizens in a larger societal realm: "Perhaps what is so apparent in classic blues is the sense for the first time that the Negro felt he was part of the superstructure at all. The lyrics of classic blues become concerned with situations and ideas that issued from one area of a much larger human concern" (87). Brown's and Dunbar's appropriation of the vernacular demonstrates how they recognized the daily struggles of everyday African Americans while the writers were in more "established" circles on account of their literary accomplishments.

Baraka continues in his assessment of blues music that access to the commercial market is the defining threshold between primitive blues and classic blues. The same can be said of Dunbar's and Brown's formal training as writers. It would become the basis for communicating the sentiments and the language of the black working poor, much like Burnett's cinematic style in his early films. Dunbar's poem "A Negro Love Song" conveys the sentiments between a romantic couple through black vernacular:

Seen my lady home las' night
 Jump back honey, jump back,
 Hel' huh han' an sque'z it tight,
 Jump back honey, jump back.
 Hyeahd huh sigh a little sigh,
 Seen a light gleam f'om huh eye
 An' a smile go flittin' by—
 Jump back, honey, jump back. (357)

Dunbar demonstrates in this stanza the merging of the slave's vernacular within the framework of the "master's literature," as Houston A. Baker observes.⁷⁶ The film's central narrative also points to Buddy's blues musician mentors who would fall under the "primitive" category. Baraka offers this description of the blues:

The emancipation of the slaves proposed for them a normal human existence, a humanity impossible under slavery. Of course, after slavery, the average Negro's

⁷⁶ Baker also discusses Dunbar as an example of black writers demonstrating literary talents, much like the slave narratives of Douglass, Jacobs, and Wilson. He explains, "Like those of the eighteenth-century Afro-American poet Phillis Wheatley, Paul Laurence Dunbar's life and works have normally been interpreted by critics as documentary evidence in what can be termed an ongoing historico-critical discourse. This discourse, which has the effect of a 'state of the race' address, defines Afro-American literary works of art as covariant signs of a historical, racial 'progress'" (*Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature* 117).

life in America was, using the more ebullient standards of the average American white man, a shabby, barren existence. But still this was the black man's first experience of time when he could be alone. The leisure that could be extracted from even the most desolate sharecropper's shack in Mississippi was a novelty, and it served as an important catalyst for the next form blues took. (Jones, *Blues People* 61)

The moment in which Baraka describes how the blues singer began to develop their craft refers to a release from physical and mental bondage. The challenge was to establish full autonomy over one's creativity and use of an outlet to express their emotions.

The 1927 Mississippi Flood is another example in which Jim Crow laws could be used to exercise control over a black man's masculine identity.⁷⁷ Buddy makes two observations about the site: he explains that multiple deaths were the outcome of an effort to fight off a powerful flood; and he references the capturing of black men to work on building a new levee because they appeared idle. The latter observation draws another connection to a W.C. Handy song, "Joe Turner's Blues," which describes how a man named Joe Turner would look for unemployed black men to arrest and assign them to do hard labor.⁷⁸ This directly connects to Buddy's recollection that his grandfather was

⁷⁷ The 1927 Mississippi Flood hit New Orleans near the end of April. Black men who law enforcement officers considered idle were captured and forced to work on the levees. Barry describes their work conditions:

There was no relief from the work. There could be none. The river took no rest. And while blacks did the most physical labor, everyone worked. The American Legion ran kitchens at the levee camps, cooking thousands of meals a day. Foremen, all white, levee guards, mostly white, and levee workers, all black, could get a cup of coffee in the middle of the wilderness during breaks. But the breaks were brief. The men worked hour after hour, and day after day. (193-194)

⁷⁸ August Wilson addressed this topic in his play *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* (New York: Plume, 1988). The play takes place at a Pittsburgh boarding house in 1911, where a character named Herald Loomis arrives there after having worked on Joe Turner's chain gang.

assigned to work on a levee. The scene converges shots of Buddy and Junior driving over the Mississippi River with archival footage of men in chain gangs working on railroads in a manner similar to the stills shown at the beginning of the film. The chain gang serves as a threshold symbol for the distinction between urban and rural landscapes. The latter are a site for punishment in which a black man can be imprisoned and subjected to hard labor because he does not have a job. Men who were imprisoned were, in the aftermath of the flood, forced to help build the levees to prevent another natural catastrophe. The shots of men performing hard labor are supplemented with audio of chain gang songs that would be performed.

The young Junior's characteristic of obedience at the heart of his masculine identity becomes tested when he and Buddy spend the night at the crossroads, anticipating the arrival of the devil. It is a moment where Burnett explores the role of the supernatural in the way one comes in touch with his masculine identity. Junior, the child, appears visibly nervous while Junior, the adult explains the legends of how Tommy Johnson, Robert Johnson, and Petey Wheatstraw, the self-professed "devil's son in law," sold their soul to the devil for the ability to become master guitarists and songwriters.⁷⁹ Each of their lives would end violently. W.C. Handy appears as a ghost to the young Junior while Buddy is asleep. The ghost appears in conjunction with the full moon. The superimposed image of an actor portraying Handy is matched with audio of Handy's actual voice. He shares with Junior the story behind the opening lines of "St. Louis

⁷⁹ Patricia Schroeder further explains the popularity of selling one's soul to the devil among blues musicians:

Thus labeled as devil's minions within their communities, some musicians actively embraced the image, notably the popular Peetie Wheatstraw, who billed himself as 'The Devil's Son in Law.' But the specific story of selling one's soul to the devil for musical proficiency was most commonly associated with Tommy Johnson (probably no relation to Robert), who lived in Hazelhurst, Mississippi where Robert Johnson also lived for a time during his absence from Robinsonville.(29)

Blues,” “When I hate to see the evening sun go down.” This appearance of Handy returns to the inclusion of women blues singers. Archival footage is shown of Bessie Smith performing “St. Louis Blues,” notably the most famous singer to record this song. This portion assigns young Junior as the person responsible for the further continuation of the profiles of Handy and women blues singers, since the film provides no voiceover at this point. Junior’s encounter with Handy establishes him as the person through whom the history of the blues will be conveyed. Buddy laughs at Junior when his nephew shares his encounter with Handy’s ghost. Buddy’s dismissal of Junior’s encounter as a myth solidifies him as the trickster-like figure, yet the moment also reveals that Junior may have a capacity to perceive images and sounds that his blues musician uncle does not possess.

The film concludes when Buddy brings Junior to a juke joint to show examples of masculine identities presented under the most extreme circumstances. The owner disapproves of Junior’s presence for fear of her business being closed down due to the presence of an underage child, while other patrons inform Buddy that Phil has been looking for him. Buddy is convinced that he has shown Junior what he is being saved from. Phil arrives and chastises his brother for exposing him to what he calls “the devil’s work” and potentially destroying his relationship with their mother. The final shot of the narrative shows Buddy with a look of remorse as he watches his nephew and brother leave. The adult Junior concludes the narrative by noting that he finished the book Buddy wanted to finish. He adds that his blues musician uncle ultimately became a preacher alongside his brother. The final shot of the narrative is a still of Buddy and Phil in their suits holding their bibles. This moment ironically marks a final correspondence

between Handy's ability to escape his father's profession as a preacher and Buddy's inability to do so.

The events that occur in *Warming by the Devil's Fire* take place roughly a year after the murder of Emmitt Till and several months after the Montgomery Bus Boycott in December of 1955. Both documentaries reference institutional practices of racial terror that span 125 years. A critical topic at stake in both films is the protection of one's folkloric legacy. Buddy's concerns about the blues are reinforced when he takes Junior to meet his mentor, Honey Boy, a self-taught musician who has gone blind in his later years. Honey Boy expresses to Junior that the dominance of rock and roll has reduced the legacy of the blues to mastering guitar chords. The focus on capturing the emotional core of the black laboring and domestic class throughout the South has been lost. Honey Boy's concerns mirror a definition of the blues that singer and guitarist Son House provides.⁸⁰ An excerpt from an interview is inserted over a performance of House's song "Death Letter Blues." He explains to the audience his concerns about the simplification of the blues to a point where its emotional core has been compromised. House presents the blues not as "a play thing," as he describes in the clip of him being interviewed while the song continues. The song is concerned with a moment of sharp betrayal in a heterosexual romance that causes such distress that it drives one to murder. "Death Letter Blues" is about a man who learns about the death of a woman he once loved and

⁸⁰ Eddie "Son" House (1902-1988) came to prominence as a blues musician in the 1930s and would perform professionally for over forty years. The recording Burnett uses in *Warming by the Devil's Fire* where House explains what the blues means is consistent with the following passage:

His blues drew upon and gave expression to a certain profound conflicts that simmered in the darker recesses of his mind. That was one of the reasons for him taking up music. It is also likely that House's extensive experience as a preacher influenced his conception of what constituted good blues. His comments on the topic—and especially his criticisms of Patton in this respect—make it clear that House thought that, just as a good sermon ought to have a central theme, a blues song should have thematic coherence. (Beaumont 56)

goes to identify her body at the morgue. The man recalls loving her and not having it reciprocated, yet he is conflicted with not having someone beside him in spite of their complicated relationship.

Blues music is the first art form for which formerly enslaved Africans in America were able to express their fullest and imaginative capacity after the abolishment of slavery and collapse of the Reconstruction project. It was one of the first moments where the black laborer had an art form to convey his internal and external identity. The legacy of slavery and the early history of black male laborers in the South are commonalities that both documentaries shared because they embody expressions of masculine self-identity and a sense of self-determination that are informed by limited labor situations ranging from the captivity of slavery to the stagnancy of sharecropping. Each man responds to either a desire to break free or a resignation to a lifetime of stagnant labor. This thread also provides a historical landscape to understand the state of black working-class men in South Los Angeles after the Watts revolt. The fact that Nat Turner would kill the wives and children of plantation owners to attack the institution of slavery explains how it was impossible to penetrate this system in America for centuries. *Warming by the Devil's Fire* magnifies the practice of arresting suspiciously idle black men and forcing them to become a free labor force by working on chain gangs. The legacy of forced labor in the South would motivate residents to move out west during World War II as industrial plants and stockyards were looking for more workers.

Blues music would emerge into a full-fledged performance outlet during the period after the Reconstruction period. African Americans could communicate their creative and emotional landscape through the art form in a way that they could not do so

while enslaved. The cultivation of blues music became more important as the Great Migration to the Northeast and Midwest catapulted African Americans to a more urban, industrial-driven society. It became their primary outlet to express the ways their transition to new experiences, new geographies, and new ways of being affected their psychological and emotional state and their grasp of personal autonomy over their lives. Burnett and his colleagues of the Los Angeles School face a similar task in terms of the films they wanted to make. These filmmakers wanted to use their work to convey information, practices, and sensibilities specific to the lives of African Americans that was more compatible to their contemporaries who used other artistic expressions to dispense the same sentiments.

Burnett's contribution is positioned alongside other installments from the PBS series *The Blues* directed by Wim Wenders and Martin Scorsese, the series' executive producer. Bruce Jackson's analysis of Burnett's film positions *Warming by the Devil's Fire* alongside prior music documentaries from Scorsese (*The Last Waltz*, 1976) and Wenders (*Buena Vista Social Club*, 1998) and how they compare to what appears in *The Blues*:

Both Scorsese and Wenders have made important and successful documentaries about performing musicians....But in *The Blues* series, it was Scorsese and Wenders on their own, trying to reconstruct a past with which neither of them had any real links at all. They had good feelings about the music, they had contrived asides, but it takes more than good feelings and contrived asides to make a film that works. Some of the nonhistorical films in the series did that, and so did the film by Charles Burnett. ("On Charles Burnett's 'Warming by the Devil's Fire'")

Burnett's direct knowledge of blues music provides him with the ability to offer the historical, physical, and emotional layers needed to understand the history and significance of blues music. *Warming by the Devil's Fire* also demonstrates how Burnett's filmmaking exemplifies the way the construction and development of cultural memory and history contributes to one's identity. His personal investment in the music places him in the same role as Junior by offering a cinematic counterpart to completing Buddy's book on the history of the blues.

The importance of Nat Turner's story is that it centralizes the conflict between official documentation and oral transfer when discussing a highly contentious subject. *Nat Turner: A Troublesome Property* follows the trajectory of Turner's story in terms of how it adapts to the author's objectives within a historical moment. Embedded in this conflict is the importance of owning a story as a step towards obtaining control over one's identity. The relationship between narrative and identity is also important to blues music and how it pertains to the role of the blues musician. *Warming by the Devil's Fire* places the blues musician as guide through his nephew's coming of age in which the overall narrative uses the history of the blues to magnify the importance of the music. The landmarks of blues music are tied with both the luminary musicians and the film's characters to reveal how blues music was important in constructing African American vernacular during and after slavery. Both films emphasize the importance of the legacy of slavery to understand the historical trajectory of black working class men in South Los Angeles.

There are important dynamics necessary to understand the stagnant activity of living-wage job creation and the apathetic attitudes the stagnation produced in black

working-class men from the late 1960s through the early 1990s. It is important to recognize the correspondence between the efforts to fight against being an enslaved laborer and the development of an identity amidst limited employment opportunities between Reconstruction and the implementation of Jim Crow Laws. Both struggles shape our understanding of the characters in Burnett's fictional films.

The films discussed throughout this project have focused on two generations of black men and their distinct employment circumstances. These men face the realities of living-wage employment being outsourced to suburban areas, hyper-surveillance from law enforcement due to sharp increases in gang activity and the transactions of weapons and drugs, plus geographic isolation from the rest of the city. These matters are further complicated by the absence of jobs that provide a reliable source of income and a nurturing community. These deficiencies produce an expression of masculine identity that depends heavily on living on the fringes with as few responsibilities as possible. The shift from films such as *Several Friends* and *Killer of Sheep* to *My Brother's Wedding* and *To Sleep with Anger* magnify the persistence of the issue of class persists in black families between the professional middle-class and the working class.

Nat Turner: A Troublesome Property and *Warming by the Devil's Fire* were both made during the first decade of the twenty-first century. These films contain conventional uses of documentary through archival stills and footage and the dramatization of actual events and semi-autobiography. They demonstrate Burnett's effort to document 140 years of American history and illustrate the landscape and function of cultural memory. The use of spatial narration in both films challenges the notion that historical information is accumulated through a rigidly linear format. Each of

their respective structures resembles the multiplicity of how the viewer receives information because they promote inter-textual engagements that unilaterally organizes a variety of different sources.

Spatial narration in each of these films unveils an attempt for black men to gain authority to assert their identity. The problem that many of them face is that, despite their efforts, they hesitate to move forward because they do not know how to begin this process. The absence of economic resources, the decline of creative contributions, and the broken commitment to revive the region contribute to the fact that a contemporary sense of masculinity searches for models that do not exist, while rejecting the ones that stand before them, thus rendering the older generation of black men irrelevant. Burnett argues passionately for the sustenance of cultural memory because it serves not so much as an emulative structure, but as a basis to cultivate one's identity.

Conclusion:
**Lessons from Burnett's Focus on Traditional and Contemporary Masculinities
 among Black Working-Class Men of South Los Angeles**

This study of black working-class masculinities in Charles Burnett's films raises the importance of bridging past and present identities in a twenty-first century context. The presentations of masculine identities in these films provide a basis to explain why issues concerning the second Great Migration and the outcome of the 1965 Watts Revolt remain relevant in 2013. The topics and cinematic strategies in Charles Burnett's films from 1969 through 1990, plus his two documentaries from the 2000s, are important to consider in the expansion from a specific form of African American independent cinema to a potential pan-African cinema in the digital age.

Burnett's concern about losing cultural memory is shared by his colleagues who enrolled in the Theater Arts program at UCLA from the late '60s through the mid-'80s. The body of work that emerges from the Los Angeles School of Black Filmmakers range from its early years (Burnett's *Killer of Sheep*, Gerima's *Bush Mama* and *Harvest: 3,000 Years*, Ben Caldwell's *I and I: An African Allegory*), its middle period (Julie Dash's *Illusions*, Alile Sharon Larkin's *A Different Image*, Billy Woodberry's *Bless Their Little Hearts*), and its latter years (Zeinabu Irene Davis's *Cycles*, Iverson White's *Dark Exodus*). The presentations of African Americans outside of the studio system from the years of the L.A. Rebellion centralize the relationship with one's cultural past.⁸¹ The 1990s saw an emergence of African American filmmakers who released projects through the commercial cineplexes and the art house cinemas. It was not until this period that wider audiences came to know Burnett, Gerima, or Dash. Their films, released in the

⁸¹ Each of the filmmakers mentioned had studied film at UCLA during a series of waves. The first wave begins as early as 1967 through 1974. The second wave takes place from 1975 through 1982. The third wave occurs from 1983 through 1987.

early '90s (Burnett's *To Sleep with Anger*, Gerima's *Sankofa*, Dash's *Daughters of the Dust*), were either set in the past (*Daughters of the Dust*) or had direct contact with the legacies of the American South (*Sankofa*, *To Sleep with Anger*). Burnett and his colleagues used non-conventional structures for their narratives to unveil the brutalities of slavery, the potential consequences of migration, and the importance of sustaining folklore. The practices of digital cinema and avenues of distribution that have expanded through internet and new viewing technology serve as another avenue to reach a significant number of viewers and new strategies for cinematic storytelling.

The mainstream American film industry still remains the central infrastructure through which a film can attract a mass audience; yet it is important to identify how emerging filmmakers, or even Burnett himself, is finding ways to distribute and exhibit his films in the age of new media. In some ways, it will follow past distribution and exhibition models for the digital age. The films released by filmmakers from the Los Angeles School followed the continuum of African American filmmakers from the early twentieth century. A correspondence between filmmakers of the 1910s and '20s and filmmakers of the '60s, '70s, and '80s is they share a concern for acquiring scarce resources to make and circulate their films to wider audiences. Filmmakers such as William Foster (*The Railroad Porter*), Oscar Micheaux (*Within Our Gates*), and George and Noble Johnson (Lincoln Motion Picture Company) were most concerned with finding either financial support from studios that specialized in films made for black audiences, or building a network of independent funders. Burnett and his colleagues relied on their university training and resources to experiment with different forms of storytelling to magnify aspects of African American lives, history and culture that were

not acknowledged in mainstream American cinema. Outlets within the community such as cultural centers, local festivals, and places of worship were how Burnett and his colleagues were able to construct their audiences. An unfortunate reality for the filmmakers of the Los Angeles School was that there was nothing for them to transition into after film school outside of the film festival circuit. Filmmakers either obtained university faculty positions or pursued grants to continue making their work. These strategies were vital for them to continue making films that magnified the most obscure aspects of African American lives and culture from margin to center.

New practices of digital media, namely among filmmakers who became university faculty, allow for a correspondence between cinema and new web-based formats to circulate literature, music, and visual art in ways comparable to the permeation of Burnett's influences. The works of Oscar Micheaux and Chester Himes serve as models for Charles Burnett to explore the construction of masculine identity in an urban, industrialized context through the transfer of migration. Himes provided the context to explore issues black men faced transitioning to Los Angeles in the workplace and the overall transition to another city. Himes's novels substantiated these trends among newly arrived migrants by focusing on the relationship between the class and racial conflicts of their home and work lives and how these affected their psychological conception of life in Los Angeles. Micheaux's films focus on physical migration and correspondence between North and South and class distinctions embedded in each geography's hierarchy. The geographical correspondence between the rural South and the urban North in *Within Our Gates* provide the basis for discussing the distance between older and younger residents in the collection of films by Burnett this project discusses. The distance for

Burnett's characters is marked by how each generation finds relevance in its immediate ancestral past to construct a masculine identity, or if they concede that it interferes with the demands of a contemporary way of life.

The second Great Migration and the 1965 Watts Revolt are two particular points at which different masculine identities are constructed between older and younger residents. The former is marked by the United States' entry into World War II and President Roosevelt's subsequent signing of Executive Order 8802 to desegregate the workforce in defense plants. These opportunities to receive living-wage employment, plus the increase of industrial factories and shipyards were avenues for these men to purchase homes and automobiles, albeit in the face of racial discrimination at the workplace and through housing covenants. Their new lives may have not allowed them to witness the racial utopia which so many associated with Los Angeles, but it was a space for them to determine the course of their lives in a way never allowed under Jim Crow laws.

The aftermath of the Watts Revolt placed a younger generation of black men in an increasingly vulnerable position due to the damage to the region's physical space and the overall economic infrastructure. These factors produced a dismissive attitude about the recovery efforts that were either misguided by elected officials or neglected altogether. Instances such as police brutality and maltreatment from neighborhood shopkeepers increased tensions even more prior to the revolt because it would further mark young black men in South Los Angeles as a target. The relocation of living-wage employment to the outskirts of the city made it difficult for these young men to accumulate a material wealth comparable to their immediate elders, and it would invite more illegal forms of

income revenue through drug and weapon transactions roughly a decade and a half later. Mike Davis offers unflinching accounts of the changes South Los Angeles underwent in the 1980s namely with the circulation of weapons and drugs and the increase of police brutality (*City of Quartz* 296).

A vast historical overview of African American independent cinema can serve as a basis for digital cinema to construct multiple strategies that centralizes the relationship between historical and contemporary content. Teshome Gabriel introduces multiple concepts in his presentation of Third Cinema that concern the relationship between space and time, the distinction between official history and cultural memory, and the function of cinema as a public service institution that allows for mass participation (“Towards a Critical Theory of Third World Films” 33). The concentration on space as opposed to temporal duration allows Burnett to follow how younger characters struggle with cultural memory. Gabriel’s work helps understand how Burnett unveils the cycle between the past and the present to sustain and strengthen one’s identity. A later example of Burnett’s work demonstrates his continuation of this particular project.

The importance of cultural memory as opposed to official history becomes a matter of taking the initiative to preserve one’s identity. Official history suggests an attempt to impose one’s story onto others. It has been argued that the classical Hollywood narrative structure has often functioned in a way where the identity of African American lives and culture run the risk of sacrificing the nuances that make it so important. These dynamics culminate to promote a level of inclusivity in the filmmaking process that Burnett wants to promote. His purpose for doing so is to demystify cinema for a community that historically has not been encouraged to participate. Burnett seeks to

offer an agency that will allow for a preservation of cultural memory relevant to a contemporary sense of masculinity. The concept of official history versus popular memory points to ways Burnett utilizes various narrative structures to emphasize the importance of cultural memory to identify cycles shared between historical and contemporary masculine identities.

Several Friends and *The Horse* are two of Burnett's earliest films. *The Horse* alludes to the legacy of sharecropping during Reconstruction and the Jim Crow South and the meager options for black men to work for almost nothing. The situation of young black men who appear jobless in *Several Friends* reflects a cycle separated that begins from the post-Reconstruction South of the late 19th century and continues through the Watts Revolt. By the late 1960s, relocation of plants and factories led to the dearth of jobs. What the situation of the period after the Watts Revolt has in common with a form of rigid property ownership that subjects black men to excessive labor for minimal earnings during sharecropping is that they reflect limited employment opportunities for Black men within roughly a century.

The discussion of these two films illuminates how Burnett finds cultural memory as a central issue at stake. It is his way to magnify how his generation, many of whom were born or arrived in Los Angeles during World War II, is not so far removed from their elders as they would like to believe. Whereas the situation in the Jim Crow South did not permit black men to care for themselves, the absence of economic resources after the Watts Revolt forced apathy onto a generation of black men where they find recovery to be as distant as possible. The polarized masculine identities of black nationalists and the onscreen image of Sidney Poitier were examples of how far removed Hollywood was

from the realities of black people, despite Poitier's dignified persona. The statements *Several Friends* and *The Horse* make about the masculine identities of black working-class men is that older and younger residents are engaged in a cycle of minimal employment opportunities for black working-class men in South Los Angeles, even predating the migrants' arrival from the Southeastern part of the United States.

Killer of Sheep illustrates the outcome of the Watts Revolt approximately a decade later. The demographic of black working-class men in Los Angeles has conceded to the evacuation of living-wage employment and resorts to either more pedantic ways of earning a living in the service sector, or survives at the expense of harming others. A recent migrant, Stan's only employment option is to work at a slaughterhouse. The fact that he kills sheep for a living resembles the internal distresses he faces from his job, his concerns about not being able to provide for his family, and the recollections of his childhood that remind him of his inability to protect loved ones. The brief acknowledgments that Stan makes of his past, such as mentioning to his friend Oscar that he has not attended a church service since moving from the South, and scolding his son for using the term "Madea" to address his mother, show that he is desperate to abandon it. His peace of mind with the cultural memory of his childhood becomes evident when he realizes the measure of his resiliency after failed attempts to purchase a car motor and to generate some additional money at the race track. Stan understands that it is not his past or where he comes from that is an obstacle for him to move forward, but his urgency to recognize that he does not need to be passive in determining what he needs to do for his family and himself. Blaxploitation movies marked an attempt by major movie studios to resonate with black audiences while also making a lot of money. Nevertheless, stories

about the black working-class and the working-poor were neglected. *Killer of Sheep* demonstrates that cultural memory cannot be discarded from one's masculine identity. An understanding of and engagement with the past is necessary as a basis to determine what mistakes to learn from and what steps need to be taken to move forward.

My Brother's Wedding and *To Sleep with Anger* are examples in which historical and contemporary representations of black working-class masculine identity are shown sharing the same physical and narrative space. The more conventional narrative structure Burnett uses, as opposed to the loose and episodic arrangement of scenes in his earlier films, centralizes a clash between older and younger expressions of masculinity in each film. The clash in *My Brother's Wedding* lies between Pierce and Mr. Mundy. Their relationship is based upon dependency, as Pierce relies on his father for a job and a place to live. What makes this possible is that Mr. Mundy is a model of stability as a business owner and home owner, opposite to his son's wandering nature and unrealistic expectations of a partner in a heterosexual romance. The moments of horseplay between father and son show that there are moments where that dynamic is disrupted and the historical clash is subsided. Pierce's brother, Wendell, possesses a masculine identity more compatible to their father's with respect to material wealth and a career as a lawyer. Yet Wendell is similar to Pierce in that he shows no desire to identify with the past of Southern migrants. As a lawyer who is about to marry into a family of professionals, Wendell sees the past as irrelevant to his ascendancy. *My Brother's Wedding* disrupts the false expectation that discarding one's cultural memory can strengthen one's masculine identity. Such expectations are caused by the character's dodging of responsibilities and attempts to dominate women that threaten them.

In *To Sleep with Anger* Babe Brother rejects his past in a similar fashion, albeit with more contempt. The relationship with the family's immediate rural Southern identity is what places him at odds with his brother, Junior. Junior is a clearer emulation of his father, Gideon, than Babe Brother because he embodies the work ethic and focus on maintaining a cohesive familial unit that his father values. It produces a sibling rivalry in which Gideon's condemnation of Babe Brother for not possessing the same values as his older brother fuels the younger sibling's animosity. The arrival of Harry, Gideon's friend from "back home," presents a masculine identity of the South that prompts Babe Brother to romanticize the past in a way that counters the portrait of hard work and commitment to duty that has always distanced him from his father. These competing expressions of masculine identity based on a Southern migrant identity function as two forces that are battling for Babe Brother's soul. He internalizes Harry's attitude that enables the objectification of women, a reliance on gambling, and a dependence on violence to resolve troubling situations. Babe Brother releases both Harry's idea of masculinity and his contentiousness towards his father when his attitude results in his near death and an injury to his mother's hand. The death of Harry and the family's renewed unity signify an attempt to reconcile historical and contemporary masculinities as identities that can co-exist. *To Sleep with Anger* reveals how the refusal to recognize and accept cultural memory as part of their masculine identity can make men vulnerable to accepting a romanticized version of the past as reality.

The discussion of *Nat Turner: A Troublesome Property* and *Warming by the Devil's Fire* contextualizes folklore in the early twenty-first century to sustain an elusive historical thread for younger generations to understand. Buddy in *Warming by the*

Devil's Fire demonstrates the way black men serve a moral obligation to preserve and share the obscure history of African Americans. This sense of duty allows him to guide and instruct Junior about the importance of the blues and the threat that it may disappear at some point. *Warming by the Devil's Fire* shows how artistic expression is a way to outline the way how masculine identity is constructed, plus it points to other historical moments to which these expressions respond.

The analysis of historical and contemporary masculine identities among black working-class men in South Los Angeles in Burnett's films disrupts the illusion that the past and present are inseparable. It points to the fact that the cyclical patterns black men find themselves with respect to employment and gainful resources must be recognized to understand the strategies through which black working-class male residents were able to withstand such hardships. Burnett's films are an important model to understand the most effective strategies to preserve cultural memory and determine its relevance to how black working-class or middle-class men can shape their identities in a productive and gratifying way.

In addition to the films and the content discussed at length in this project, Burnett's most recent work continues the dialogue of black masculinity and the pursuit of cultural memory. Burnett's most recent feature film, *Namibia: The Struggle for Liberation* (2007) focuses on the country's origins of gaining its independence from South Africa. The film's central character, Samuel Nujoma (Carl Lumbly), is the leader of SWAPO (South West Africa People's Organization). The group is responsible for constructing a strategy to form its own government and mobilize its residents to become independent of South African rule (Smith "A Quiet Storm").

The film's narrative structure and filmmaking strategies are more in alignment with *My Brother's Wedding* and *To Sleep with Anger* in terms of its editing style and cinematography. It uses a linear approach to trace Nujoma's emergence from a grassroots leader who organizes a group in the face of potential imprisonment, to speaking on behalf of Southwest African residents before the United States. Nujoma is presented as a model of masculinity through the way he promotes an agenda of self-determination. Nujoma undergoes his own transformation, which begins as a pursuit towards understanding how the power structure works. The church becomes a site in which Nujoma and his collaborators struggle to reconcile the principles of Christianity with the realities of living under brutal white supremacist rule. It also becomes a site in which Sam learns about the Back-to-Africa movement led by Marcus Garvey, and the Haitian Revolution pursued by Toussaint L'Overture as potential models to lead efforts towards independence. The film's conventional narrative structure situates Namibia's historical narrative in accordance with a larger history of liberation within the African Diaspora.

Under the rule of the South African government, African-born residents are discouraged from speaking their own language in public. Scenes throughout the film show deferential acknowledgement of white citizens and law enforcement is demanded. For instance, practices as menial as selling white bread to white customers only are strictly enforced. Nujoma's maturation into an organizer embodies a fearlessness and sacrifice as characteristics of masculinity that serve as necessary for self-determination and crucial to fighting against the existing power structure. He is frequently monitored by law enforcement officers throughout Southwest Africa, and he is subjected to

excessive questioning about his activities. As Namibia became an independent country in 1990, Nujoma was elected its founding President. Similar to *Killer of Sheep*, Burnett cast non-professional actors alongside widely known performers such as Lumbly and Danny Glover. The film was funded by the Namibian Film Commission and the Pan Afrikan Center of Namibia. The funding sources demonstrate the efforts of African American filmmakers such as Burnett to create projects on an international scale. The multiple presentations of black masculinity in Burnett's films from 1969 through 1990, plus his documentaries from the 2000s, are discussed in an international context when identifying ways in which Samuel Nujoma's characteristics of masculine identity both consists and contrasts with protagonists from Burnett's earlier films.

Namibia: The Struggle for Liberation positions Burnett in a conversation about "accented cinema," as conceived by Hamid Naficy. His focus on filmmakers within the geographical margins of Third Cinema concerns questions of physical displacement and multiplicity within the articulation of language. Double consciousness, a concept of dual identity within singular citizenship that traces back to W.E.B. DuBois's *The Souls of Black Folk*, is central to Naficy's discussion of an accented cinema and the filmmakers he analyzes. He explains the style of filmmaking informed by this notion of double consciousness:

From the cinematic traditions they acquire a set of voices, and from the exilic and diasporic traditions they acquire a second. This double consciousness constitutes the accented style that not only signifies upon exile and other cinemas but also signifies the condition of exile itself. It signifies upon cinematic traditions by its artisanal and collective modes of production, which undermine the dominant

production mode, and by narrative strategies, which subvert that mode's realistic treatment of time, space, and causality. It also signifies and signifies upon exile by expressing, allegorizing, commenting upon, and critiquing the conditions of its own production, and deterritorialization. (Naficy 22)

Burnett becomes situated in Naficy's dialogue in a way that complicates the notion of exile. He is an African American filmmaker receiving funds from the Namibian government to make a film about its founding President. In this case, exile is most relevant when talking about the absence of a collective African diasporic masculine identity from mainstream American cinema, or at least in its narrative structure. The fact that *Namibia: The Struggle for Liberation* employs a cinematic style consistent with a Hollywood movie turns the concept on its head in that the filmmaking strategies are used to prioritize a type of masculinity not often shown in commercial cinema. The pan-African component of the film points to Naficy's further inquiries on collectivism, mainly with respect to spectatorship. He observes that collective filmmaking "is being renewed and reexamined as a viable alternative film practice...Collectivism, however, involves not only the collaborative production of the films but also their collective reception" (Naficy 63). The motivation behind this film was to move beyond Nujoma's autobiography, *Where Others Wavered*, and, as Burnett recalls, emphasize that "the liberation wasn't just one man, it was a whole people and the surrounding states," plus countries such as Cuba, South Korea, and China (Smith "A Quiet Storm").

The attempt of pan-African filmmaking through *Namibia: The Struggle for Liberation* also raises Naficy's concerns about potential tensions that may undermine such efforts. He explains:

The various ties may bring accented filmmakers into direct conflict with their communities at the same time they are doing their best to counter negative or inaccurate stereotypes. These filmmakers also must take into consideration the expectations and dictates of nonethnic funding agencies. These multiple demands and expectations create a heavy burden that is unlikely to be met by any single film or filmmaker. (Naficy 65)

The multilingual aspect of *Namibia: The Struggle for Liberation* posed a central challenge Burnett had to face, yet he found ways to manage the production phase. He adds, “I think you can’t look at it as problematic. You just have to take it one step at a time. You’d be surprised how simple it is....The problem we had wasn’t the size of the film. We had a lot of people who did it for the first time, and that was the problem” (Smith “A Quiet Storm”). The film leaves lingering questions about strategies to resolve inevitable conflicts in attempts for pan-African collective production. Responses to these questions also provide an opportunity to determine ways multiple presentations of masculine identity are offered to identify complimentary and contrasting images of men of African descent.

The potential for future pan-African film productions begs the consideration of whether digital filmmaking in the early twenty-first century offers potential artistic and financial flexibility for filmmakers of the African Diaspora in ways it has never been offered in the history of cinema. Lucy Gebre-Egziabher explores the potential of digital cinema for African filmmakers to utilize their skills in new ways, and the concerns the medium raises about producing films that are high on quantity and profit and low on quality. Gebre-Egziabher identifies the Nigerian digital film industry “Nollywood” as an

example of the latter. She offers the following profile of the filmmakers and their products:

This phenomenon is labeled “video-film” because it is not necessarily films produced in the traditional ways of cinema, but rather stories recorded on home videos. A typical director of video-film does not have a traditional filmmaking background. The new crop of directors range from merchants with access to capital necessary to produce a project, to theater actors who have the dramatic theater background and use video to record plays. (Gebre-Egziabher 4)

Gebre-Egziabher’s description of the films at the center of Nollywood also points to the paradox that confronts the notion of inclusivity a pan-African film movement demands.

Gebre-Egziabher magnifies the separate realms between filmmaking novices who use portable digital film equipment to minimal effect and formally-trained filmmakers who are exploring the medium’s capacities. She states explicitly,

In spite of the great sacrifices and achievements by the pioneers of this cinema like Ousmane Sembene (Senegal), Med Hondo (Mauritania), Sarah Maldoror (Guadeloupe), Safi Faye (Senegal). Haile Gerima (Ethiopia), Djibril Diop Mambety (Senegal), to name a few, African cinema is at a crucial cross roads.

Two parallel cinemas, one with a tradition of being used to espouse sociopolitical change, the other with a current trend toward a lowbrow entertainment culture.

(Gebre-Egziabher 4)

She mentions in this passage both influences and contemporaries of Burnett, who himself faces the same questions about whether this new form of technology and circulation of film and video has anything to offer him. As a celebrated filmmaker who shifts between

independent filmmaking and made-for-television projects that limit his artistic agency, Burnett's future work begs the question about the construction and presentation of a cinematic black masculine identity. The urgency of cultural memory determines if a pan-African framework best allows Burnett to transfer his cinematic strategies from a local to a global scale.

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CURRICULUM VITAE

Objective

- To produce scholarship centered in the arts and humanities that focus on African-American Cultural Production of the twentieth century based upon interdisciplinary intellectual engagement through research, teaching, and public intellectual activity.

Areas of Specialization

- Film History, Theory, and Criticism
- African-American Cinema
- American Independent Cinema
- Cinemas of Africa, Asia, Latin America, the Caribbean (Third Cinema)

Additional Areas of Competence

- Postcolonial Cultural History, Theory, and Criticism of the African Diaspora
- 20th Century American Popular Culture and Media
- 20th Century African-American Cultural History, Theory and Criticism

Education

- Ph.D. University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee, English—Modern Studies Program (August 2013)
- M.A. University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee, English—Modern Studies Program (August 2002)
- B.F.A. University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee, Film (Fall 1999)

Employment

- Interim Director & Associate Director, Ronald E. McNair Post-baccalaureate Achievement Program/Assistant Director, Graduate Diversity and Opportunities Program—University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Graduate School (August 2011-present)
- Teaching Assistant, Department of English—University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (August 2001-December 2002, August 2004-June 2006, January 2007-June 2007)
- Lecturer, Department of Africology—University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (August-December 2006, August-December, 2009)
- Lecturer, Department of Film—University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (August 2007-May 2008, January-May 2010)
- Lecturer, Department of Art & Design—University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (August 2012-present)

- Advisor, Ronald E. McNair Program—University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Graduate School (May 2002—August 2007, September 2010-August 2011)
- Tutor, The Writing Center, Department of English—University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (August 2000-December 2002, September 2008-May 2012)

Academic Publications

- “The Art of Liberation: Situating Black Independent Cinema within the Black Aesthetic.” *Warpland: A Journal of Black Literature and Ideas*. Chicago State University Press. Vol. 13, No. 1 (2007).

Periodical Publications

- “Too Late to Rise?” *Undercurrents Magazine*, March 2007
- “Too Early to Mourn?” *Undercurrents Magazine*, February 2007
- “Open Mic Poetry in Milwaukee,” *Undercurrents Magazine*, October 2006
- “‘Hateful Things’ Exhibit Continues at America’s Black Holocaust Museum,” *Undercurrents Magazine*, July 2006

Professional Presentations

- “Class Position and Spatial Arrangement in Charles Burnett’s *My Brother’s Wedding*”
Minority Graduate Student Association Eyes on the Mosaic Conference, University of Chicago (May 2010)
- “The Consequences of Migration and the Recovery of Cultural Memory in *To Sleep with Anger*”
Minority Graduate Student Association Eyes on the Mosaic Conference, University of Chicago (May 2008)
- “A Cycle of Perpetual Stagnancy”
UW-Milwaukee, Golda Meir Library, The Library and the Scholar Lecture Series (March 2008)
Society for Cinema and Media Studies Conference, Philadelphia, PA (March 2008)
- “Ambivalent Appropriations”
Midwest Interdisciplinary Graduate Conference, UW-Milwaukee (February 2008)
- “Diasporic Art and Politics”
UW System Institute of Race and Ethnicity, Graduate Scholar-in-Residence presentation, UW-Milwaukee (December 2006)
- “The Art of Liberation”
National Association for African-American Studies Conference, Baton Rouge, LA (February 2006)
- “Black British Cinema and Cultural Criticism”
10th Annual Eyes on the Mosaic Conference, University of Chicago (April 2004)
- “Analyzing the Matriarchal Gaze”
Society for Cinema and Media Studies Conference, Minneapolis, MN (March 2003)

- “Sistah-centric: The Films of Julie Dash”
National Black Graduate Student Conference, Washington, D.C. (March 2002)
- “VOICES: Using the Past to Empower the Present”
National Black Graduate Student Conference, Madison, WI (March 2000)

Teaching Experience

- Art & Design 150—Multicultural America: Narratives of Identity (2012-2013)
- Film 301—Conversations with Filmmakers and Critics: Radical Black Film (Fall 2007, Spring 2008, Spring 2010)
- Africology 100—Black Reality: A Survey of African-American Society (Fall 2006, Fall 2009)
- English 150—Multicultural America: Narratives of Identity (Spring 2006)
- English 290—Introduction to Film Studies (Spring 2005)
- English 286—Writing about Film and Television: The Films of Spike Lee (Fall 2004)
- Art History 205—History of Film I: Development of an Art (Spring 2002, Fall 2002, Fall 2005, Spring 2007)
- English 101—Introduction to College Writing (Fall 2001)

Academic Awards and Fellowships

- Advanced Opportunity Program Fellowship recipient, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2000-2001, Fall 2001, Fall 2006, 2007-2008
- Chancellor’s Golda Meir Library and Scholar Graduate Research Award, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2007-2008
- UW System on Race and Ethnicity Fellow, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2005-2006

Curatorial Experience

- Kente Cinema: Film Series on Independent Black Women Filmmakers
University of Wisconsin-Parkside—Kenosha, WI (Spring 2010)
- Culture and Confrontation: African American Film Series (Community Media Project)
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (Spring 2008)
- Disparities and Misconceptions—African American Film Series
America’s Black Holocaust Museum—Milwaukee, WI (2007-2008)

Service

- Search and Screen Committee, Dean of the Graduate School, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Graduate School (Spring 2013-present)
- Search and Screen Committee, Director of Graduate Education, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Graduate School (2012-2013)
- Conference Chair, MAEOPP National McNair Research Conference and Graduate Fair (Fall 2011-present)

- Search and Screen Committee, Director of Ronald E. McNair Program/Advanced Opportunity Program Fellowship, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Graduate School (2007-2008)
- Steering Committee for Undergraduate Research, University of Wisconsin Milwaukee (Spring 2008)
- Vice President of Membership, Milwaukee Graduate Assistants Association (2004-05, 2005-06)
- Committee Chair, Women and Activism Conference, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (Fall 2004)
- Chair, Lyrical Sanctuary Open Mic Series, UW-Milwaukee (November 2001-December 2006)
- Committee Chair, Woodson Week: A Celebration of African-American Heritage, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (2001-2007)
- Executive Director, SCOPE (Student Creative Outreach Providing Education/Entertainment—student organization), University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (2000-2005)
- President, Black Graduate Student Association, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (2000-01)